

## **It's For The Best**

### **Chapter 1 – The Girlfriend**

“Hello Professor Dumbledore,” said Arthur Weasley as he stepped out of the fireplace in the Headmaster’s office. As he looked around, he noticed that there were quite a few less items on the aged wizard’s desk.

It had been one month since Harry had been told about the prophecy and taken it upon himself to ‘redecorate’ Dumbledore’s office. In this short time period, Amelia Bones had been killed, Cornelius Fudge had been sacked, and Rufus Scrimgeour had been appointed Minister of Magic. This morning, Arthur had received a promotion at the Ministry of Magic, and had been summoned by Dumbledore shortly after he told his family the good news.

“Thank you for coming, Arthur,” said Albus kindly as he set down his small list of applicants for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. None of them had the right qualifications. “Would you care for a lemon drop?”

“Thank you,” said Arthur, grabbing one out of the tray and sticking it into his mouth. “Now, what did you want to see me about?”

“It has come to my attention that Harry Potter secretly has been developing feelings for your daughter, Ginevra.”

Mr. Weasley smiled. “We’d always hoped that would happen, but as I understand it, she’s dating some other bloke now.” He closed his eyes to concentrate. “His name’s Dean Thomas, if I’m not mistaken. I also think that Ron wrote that Harry was dating some Ravenclaw girl.”

Dumbledore chuckled. This would be easier than he thought. “You of course know that romances at their ages come and go quickly,” Arthur nodded, “and I know for a fact that Harry’s involvement with that girl is over. We both know that true love, which I believe Harry and Ginny share, will last forever.”

“Truthfully Albus, I do think she’s over her crush. Even if Harry is starting to fancy her, I’m sure it’s not that serious.”

"I've been sure they were meant to be ever since he rescued her from the Chamber of Secrets," said Dumbledore confidently, "but I do believe that it might be a good idea if we helped speed up the process. After all, Harry is grieving the loss of his godfather and could use all the support he can get now, not in six months or a year from now. Would you care for another lemon drop?"

Arthur was getting a bit uneasy with where this conversation was going. He generally tried to stay out of his kids' love lives unless they asked him for help or advice. But as he swallowed his second lemon drop, he became calmer.

With a twinkle in his eyes, and his most grandfatherly expression, Albus continued. "I believe that a bit of love potion would push them in the right direction. You know, give Harry the extra courage to take that first step."

Arthur's eyes widened. "Y-you want to give Harry a love potion?"

"Actually," the aged wizard said kindly, "I'd like to give Harry a love potion while you administer one to your daughter."

"What, no. I'd never..."

Albus sighed as he reached for his wand much more quickly than one would expect an old man to do. "I'm sorry to have to do this, Imperio."

Arthur Weasley now sat calmly with a vacant expression on his face as Albus continued. "You will slip half of this potion into Ginny's drink tomorrow morning when no one is looking." Albus handed Arthur a vial of a clear liquid.

"Yes."

"You will tell no one of this."

"Yes."

"You will not remember it yourself until thirty days from now, when you will slip the rest into her drink, and then you will remember this no more."

“Yes.”

“You will hide this vial where no one, not even yourself, will find it until you have completed your task.”

“Yes.”

Albus relaxed in his chair. “Politically, it’s much better if Harry’s involved with a pureblood girl. In a few years, when your son-in-law becomes the next Minister of Magic, you’ll thank me for this. I’m sure that he’ll be happy to put you in charge of muggle relations. I, of course, shall be Harry’s top advisor, unofficially of course, just as I was when I first got Fudge elected. It’s for the best.”

“Yes.”

The next day, Harry was woken up in the early morning hours by a Hogwarts owl carrying a package. He’d been stuck at the Dursleys already for weeks, and hadn’t heard from any of his friends. Every two days he’d received a brief note from the Order asking if he was alright, but that was it. Neither Ron nor Hermione had responded to his letters he’d sent a week before. He wondered if someone was stealing his mail like Dobby had a few years ago. He really felt that he needed to speak with someone about Sirius, because his grief was really getting out of hand. He didn’t think he could take this solitude much longer.

The Dursleys had been leaving him alone this summer. He wasn’t required to do anything. In fact, they barely acknowledged his existence at all. He could stay in his room or go outside. He wasn’t allowed to linger in the house outside of his room. When the Dursley meals were done, either Vernon or Petunia would call out, “Boy! Get your food!” and he would come downstairs and get whatever leftovers there were, which wasn’t much when Dudley was at home. Fortunately, he was usually gone during lunch, so Harry got one decent meal per day. He would have to wash his own dishes, but that was nothing compared to the chores he used to get.

Harry took both the package and letter from the Hogwarts owl and let it drink from Hedwig's water dish. Hedwig was out delivering another letter to Hermione that Harry had written in hopes of getting a reply.

The letter was from Dumbledore, so he opened it and read,

*"Hello Harry,*

*First of all, I want to inquire about your well-being. I realize that this must be a difficult time for you. Although I'm sure Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley are helping you through this time, may I also suggest that you speak with someone else as well? Miss Ginny Weasley grew close to Sirius while her family was living at headquarters, so I am sure that she shares in your grief. She also understands what it's like for Voldemort to possess you, so she would understand you better than anyone else, if I do say so myself.*

*If you are so inclined, I wish to begin some special training with you when school starts. I'm sure I don't have to explain the purpose to you. I wish for you to survive this war and to live a long and happy life, and am dedicated to helping you do just that.*

*Your friend and headmaster,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

*P.S. I'd imagine that the Dursleys aren't giving you any sweets, so I have sent you a box of cauldron cakes. I hope you enjoy them."*

He chuckled as he thought about the headmaster's obsession with candy. Admitting to himself that he was hungry, he opened the package. He briefly wondered if Dumbledore was trying to set him up with Ginny. Try as he might, he just couldn't imagine being romantically involved with her. Besides, she goes through guys way too quickly for his taste. She broke up with Michael Corner, and before he even knew about it, she was dating Dean Thomas. After his experience with Cho, he decided that if he ever did get involved with another girl, it wouldn't be one who could switch boyfriends so quickly.

As he ate his second cauldron cake, Harry began to realize how beautiful Ginny was, and how brave she'd been to accompany him to

the Department of Mysteries. He began to think of so many good things about her as he ate cake after cake that he now realized that Dumbledore was wise to try to set them up. He realized also how wrong Dean was for Ginny. Without a moment's hesitation, he pulled out an empty scroll, along with parchment and ink.

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A few hours later, Ginny was sitting at her desk in the Burrow. While she'd been eating breakfast, soon after she'd finished her glass of pumpkin juice that her dad was kind enough to get her, she realized what a terrible mistake she'd made, and was in the process of correcting it. She was writing a letter.

"Dear Dean,

*I hope that you are well.*

*The reason that I'm writing you is because I can't be your girlfriend. It's nothing you've done. It's just that I've realized that I'm in love with someone else. I don't know how he feels about me, but I have to pursue this. I'm sure you don't want me snogging you while thinking of him anyway. I truly wish you the best and apologize if I've hurt you. You really are a nice guy, but we just weren't meant to be.*

Sincerely,

Ginny"

She folded up the letter and carried it to Ron's bedroom door, knocking on it. She needed Ron to let her borrow Pigwidgeon, and she knew just the way to get him to do it.

"Who is it?" he called through the closed door.

"Ginny."

"Go away."

"I need to borrow Pigwidgeon."

"No."

"I realized you're right about Dean and I'm breaking up with him. I just need my letter delivered."

The door opened immediately, revealing Ron, smiling ear to ear. "Well, I'm glad you finally came to your senses. You can borrow Pig for that. I hope you weren't too hard on him."

A few minutes later, Pig was flying out the window with Ginny's letter tied securely to his leg. As Ginny watched him fly away, she noticed a beautiful snowy owl coming toward them. Her heart started beating fast as she recognized Harry's owl. If only she could remember its name. Was it Hedwig or something?

"Hedwig," said Ron as the owl flew in the window, "Hasn't Dumbledore told Harry that we can't write back to him?" When Hedwig landed on Ginny's shoulder (causing her to blush more than she did at eleven years old), Ron said, "Apparently not if he's writing you. He must be going spare with those muggles, wondering why me and Hermione haven't written him back. For all he knows, we're dead. That's gotta be why he's writing you!"

Ginny glared at her brother. "What if he simply has something to say to me?" she shouted as she ran out of Ron's bedroom into her own, closing the door behind her. She carefully but quickly unrolled the parchment.

"Dearest Ginny,

*First of all, I want to thank you for accompanying me to the Department of Mysteries. I'm sorry that I endangered you, but you showed more courage than I've ever seen in my life.*

*I've never mentioned it, but I think that you are incredibly beautiful, wonderful, and many other good things. If I listed them all, there wouldn't be enough room on this parchment to fit them. I know you've got a boyfriend already, and I certainly can't blame any bloke for asking such an incredible girl like you out, but I would like you to consider going out with me instead. I'd do absolutely anything for you!*

*Even if you don't share my feelings, I still want to help you in any way I can. As I understand it, you were very close to Sirius, so you must be going through a rough time like me (except when I think of you). If you ever need to talk, let me know.*

*Please love,*

*Harry'*

Despite Dumbledore's instructions not to send Harry anything by owl, Ginny hurriedly wrote a reply and tied it to Hedwig before Ron came knocking on the door. "Was I right?" he asked.

"With her face aglow, Ginny hugged Ron excitedly and said, "No, not at all. He didn't mention you at all! He told me he thinks I'm beautiful and wonderful and wants me to be his girlfriend!"

"What?" asked Ron incredulously. "Let me see that letter."

"No, you may not! It's private! Age restriction or not, I'll hex you if you try to take it!"

"Calm down, Ginny! I hope you didn't send him a reply. You know what Dumbledore said about Death Eaters following owls to his house."

Her face turned red. "I was so excited I forgot. Besides, Hedwig was flying back anyway."

Ron looked down. "That's what confuses me. If Dumbledore was so worried, he should have had us keep Hedwig, and more importantly told Harry not to write anyone."

"Maybe he couldn't wait!" Ginny said happily.

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At Number Four Privet Drive, Harry was pacing back and forth in his room wondering how Ginny would respond to his letter. Thoughts like, 'Was I too forward? Should I have said less? Maybe I should hex

Dean. What'll I do if she says no?' were dancing in his head until finally he saw Hedwig returning.

"Finally, girl!" he shouted, causing his owl to hoot indignantly at him. "I'm sorry Hedwig. I'm just really anxious to read my letter. You did a great job."

This calmed her down enough to let Harry get his letter and opened it.

"Dear wonderful Harry,

*I realized that I was in love with you this morning, and sent a letter to Dean, breaking it off. As Pigwidgeon was flying off, Hedwig arrived with your wonderful letter that I shall cherish forever! My answer is YES! I would love to be your girlfriend! I can't wait to see you! I hope Dumbledore will let me write you again soon (I shouldn't have written this, but did NOT want to leave you waiting).*

*I too am saddened by Sirius' loss, but while I'm thinking of you, things seem so much better.*

*Snog you soon!*

*Love,*

*Ginny*

Somewhere in the back of Harry's mind, a part of him didn't really think that a couple should go straight to snogging, and wondered just how many boys Ginny had snogged, but the rest of him was too excited to dwell on that. Ginny was his girlfriend! He shouted out, "YES!" putting a fist in the air before he realized what he was doing.

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The next day, Hermione was rereading a letter Harry had sent her the week before, wondering if Dumbledore had finally told Harry that they weren't allowed to send owls.

"Hermione,

*I hope I don't sound pushy or anything, but could you please write me back. Aside from the quick notes from the Order, I haven't received anything. Nothing from you or Ron. I'm starting to wonder if you guys are all right, or if you just blame me for Sirius' death. I know that if I'd only listened to you, Sirius would still be alive. I can't say how sorry I am for leading you and the others into that danger.*

*When you were hexed, for a few moments I thought you were dead. I don't know what I'd have done if that had happened. I am so sorry! Maybe your parents have realized that being friends with me puts you in too much danger and aren't letting you write me. If that's the case, I don't blame them. I can promise that I'll never let you follow me when I'm doing something that stupid again. So please forgive me and ask your parents to forgive me for being such an idiot and that I'll try to listen to you more.*

*There is something I need to tell you and Ron the next time I see you. It can't be written in a letter. I hope that I'll see you soon. I don't know what I'd do without you, Hermione. You mean a lot to me.*

*Sincerely,*

*Harry'*

Every time she read that letter, it made her cry to think that Harry believes his friends have abandoned him, and it's his fault. He's also blaming himself for Sirius' death. The brunette sighed, considering for the millionth time whether she should disobey Dumbledore and send an owl to Harry. She'd send something by muggle post, but didn't know if the Dursleys would give him the letter. She had it all planned out to write the letter, leave her house, take the Knight Bus to The Leaky Cauldron, walk into Diagon Alley, buy an owl, and send Harry the letter. She was surprised to see Hedwig fly up to her window. She could only assume he hadn't been told and was probably going completely spare. As she took the new letter, she asked Hedwig to wait. She decided that she would respond to this letter, no matter what Dumbledore said.

*"Hello Hermione!*

*Great news! I'm now going out with Ginny! She's so incredible!*

*Anyway, she mentioned something about Dumbledore not wanting her to write me but wrote back anyway. Is that why nobody but her responded to my letters? Nobody told me about it! In fact, yesterday Dumbledore wrote me saying that he thought you and Ron were helping me through this time, but suggested that Ginny might also be able to help. Did someone tell you that Dumbledore didn't want you to write me, or did you just decide to ignore me because of what I did?*

*Anyway, I'm happy now that I've got Ginny to write to and she actually responds. I really do hope that this has been a miscommunication of some sort, but if it isn't, at least I have Ginny. She's so wonderful!*

*See you later,*

*Harry'*

Hermione stared at that piece of parchment in shock. Several things were wrong. First, Dumbledore himself had told her, Ron, and Ginny not to write Harry, but didn't tell him. Secondly, Dumbledore acted like he didn't do it or even know about it. That meant either Dumbledore was lying to someone or else someone was impersonating him. That could mean that Harry was in danger.

The second thing wrong was that all of the sudden Harry was apparently crazy about Ginny. It took him over six months before he could ask Cho Chang out, but now he could easily ask out Ginny. Hermione supposed it could have been desperation for human contact that pushed him into this infatuation. She sighed to herself, hating the role she'd played in this. A fleeting thought that maybe this was Dumbledore's way of playing matchmaker went through her mind, but she shrugged it off.

The third thing that was wrong is that Harry didn't seem to even care if he'd just lost her and Ron's friendship. He said, 'At least I've got Ginny,' as though she could make up for all his friendships. He had certainly wanted to keep his friendships when he was with Cho!

Hedwig hooted impatiently at Hermione, pulling her out of these thoughts. She said, "Alright, I'll write my letter to Harry." She took out her quill, ink, and parchment.

*"Hello Harry,*

*This has been some sort of miscommunication. We were all told by Dumbledore himself that he didn't want us to write you for fear of Death Eaters following owls to your house. You can ask Ginny. If he's told you to write her, then apparently he's no longer concerned with that.*

*First of all, NO ONE BLAMES YOU FOR SIRIUS' DEATH! It wasn't your fault, and no one – not me, my parents, Ron, or his parents – is mad at you! You are my best friend and you mean a lot to me!*

*The reason I was hurt at the Ministry is because I panicked and used a silencing spell instead of something more aggressive. If I'd have used 'expelliarmus' like you taught at the first D.A. meeting (which you taught brilliantly by the way – not just the one meeting but all of it) then I wouldn't have been hit, so that certainly wasn't your fault! I insisted on following you, and I intend to keep on following you.*

*If you'll write me back, I promise I'll write you no matter what anyone tells me. I'm sorry that I didn't reply to your last letter. I really wanted to. I even had a plan to buy an owl for that purpose. Please forgive me for not going through with the plan.*

*I must say that's surprising news about you and Ginny. I really hope you two are happy.*

*Love from,*

*Hermione"*

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When Harry got the letter from Hermione, he wondered briefly what was going on until he ate the last cauldron cake he'd been sent. Then he was just happy about the way things worked out.

## **Chapter 2 – The Birthday Present**

The next few weeks flew by quickly, with Harry and Ginny corresponding almost daily while Ron and Hermione wrote him at least once a week. To Harry's surprise, Dumbledore was sending him a package with some type of candy every week. Before Harry knew it, it was his sixteenth birthday.

Harry woke up early that morning, hoping to find an owl carrying a card and present from his beloved Ginny. However, as he looked outside after putting on his glasses, the only thing he saw was the sun rising and the persistent mist that Dumbledore told him meant that Dementors were breeding. He decided to occupy himself by rereading the letters Ginny had sent him since they started dating. After he'd been at it for about an hour, he heard a knock at the front door.

Harry listened to Uncle Vernon walk down the stairs muttering about early visitors and then heard a small scream from him as the door opened. Less than a minute later, he heard Vernon shout, "BOY, GET DOWN HERE, NOW!"

Wondering what was the matter, Harry put down the letter he was reading and got out of bed. He was wearing an oversized pair of pajamas and his hair was a complete mess – even worse than usual. He walked out his door and down the stairs to see Vernon staring with contempt at – Ginny Weasley, Albus Dumbledore, Tonks, and Remus Lupin.

"Harry!" squealed Ginny as she ran up to him smiling ear to ear. Harry thought she was positively glowing. He smiled as she pulled him into a tight hug and a quick kiss. He thought he was in Heaven!

After she released him, he heard Albus say, "Happy birthday, Harry! Unfortunately you can't leave the Dursleys for a few more weeks, but I've arranged for you to spend the day out with Miss Weasley. Mr. Lupin and Miss Tonks have kindly agreed to chaperone you two for the day until I return to pick Miss Weasley up at precisely eight p.m. May I suggest you change clothes before you leave?" Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling madly as he said the last sentence, and Harry realized what he was wearing.

As Harry's blood rushed up to his face he said, "Er, thanks. Thanks very much! Really. I'll...I'll be right back," and ran back up the stairs as Ginny and Tonks giggled.

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Ten minutes later, Harry had given up trying to get his hair perfect, deciding that it was at least better than it had been. He'd taken a very quick shower and put on clothes that Dudley had outgrown at ten years old. Aside from looking old, they actually fit Harry decently. He'd turned the jeans into knee-length shorts when he realized the legs weren't long enough for him. He was wearing a pair of shoes he'd bought the last time he was in Hogsmeade.

"Nice legs," said Ginny as he walked down the stairs.

"Same to you." Ginny, who was also wearing a pair of shorts, blushed.

"Well," said Remus, "I think it's time we left."

"Okay," said Harry, "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out," said Tonks as she pulled out an old glove. "The portkey's leaving in one minute."

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As usual, Harry fell down as he landed after the uncomfortable ride. He got to his feet and then helped Ginny up. The adults hadn't fallen down. Remus simply said, "Follow me."

They followed him out the door of the small shack they landed in and continued walking a few blocks. As Harry looked around, he noticed the top of what could only be a roller coaster, although he'd never actually seen one before. He found himself being pulled into a line at a muggle amusement park.

Ginny excitedly said, "Well, what do you think?"

Harry smiled at her. "It's brilliant, and so are you." He then kissed her deeply until Remus and Tonks told them the line was moving.

Once Remus paid for the tickets with money he said was from Dumbledore, Harry and Ginny started practically dragging Remus and Tonks from ride to ride. After three rides, it became clear that roller coasters and Tonks didn't get along. She was feeling rather ill, so Remus stayed with her while the young couple took off by themselves, sitting next to each other on rides where they got pushed close together. They even managed to kiss during some of the less intense rides.

At lunch time, Harry and Ginny walked hand-in-hand toward the food court where Remus and Tonks were to meet them. On the way, they noticed a game. Harry smiled brightly at Ginny. "I think I'll go and win you a prize."

After fifteen tries at throwing a ball at a target to win a stuffed animal for his girlfriend, Harry gave up as she laughed. Ginny then took one shot and hit the target dead center. She further humiliated Harry by giving him the huge purple panda she won, saying, "Happy birthday."

"I guess you should be a chaser," said Harry with his head down.

"Actually, I'd rather be the Golden Snitch. Catch me if you can!" She then ran off with him chasing after her a moment later.

He caught up with her just before she reached their destination, putting his arms around her. "Did you know that I caught my first Snitch with my mouth?" he asked, just before kissing her deeply. He felt her lips smile against his.

They met up with the adults for lunch (a large deluxe pizza) and then the young couple took off for more rides, kissing in between them.

At the end of the day, they walked back to the same shack they'd arrived in and portkey'd to Harry's room on Privet Drive, where Albus was waiting for them.

"Hello everyone," he said happily, "I trust you've had a good day, Harry."

"Yes I did. Thank you, sir. I just wish that Hermione and Ron could've come too."

For a moment, Dumbledore's eyes stopped twinkling. "Yes, well, we felt that the bigger the group, the more likely to bring attention. I'm sure you preferred the company of Miss Weasley over the others. Am I right? Have a piece of cake."

It was then that Harry noticed that Albus had five slices of a birthday cake on the desk on different colored plates with plastic forks. Albus grabbed one and handed it to Harry, who dug in heartily as Albus handed another to Ginny, and then the others. As Harry was enjoying his cake, he realized that the most important thing was that Ginny was with him.

After they'd eaten the cake, Dumbledore banished the garbage. "Now it's time for your gifts!" A pile of presents suddenly appeared on the desk where the cake had once been.

The first one that Harry opened was from Albus. He unwrapped the two-square-foot parcel to find it was a black case with a drivers' license with his picture and information on it. Harry looked at it in confusion. "How did you..."

Albus smiled. "Wizards don't take muggle tests for licenses. This is valid for muggle identification and driving both a car and a motorcycle. Any muggle police officer who sees it will feel compelled to give you only a verbal warning and not enter it in their system. I do ask you to be careful and learn before you actually drive. Now take the license and open the box."

He found that it contained two black helmets, each with a red phoenix painted on the front with flames instead of wings. It also contained two dark green dragon leather jackets with matching gloves. He pulled them out of the apparently bottomless case and saw a toy motorcycle. He pulled it out and looked at Dumbledore with a questioning expression.

Albus' eyes twinkled merrily. "The motorcycle actually belonged to Sirius, and he specifically wanted you to have it. If you tap it three times with your wand, it will grow to normal size. The gear is from me. Both sets will conform to the size of the wearer. I thought you might want company on your rides." He tilted his head toward Ginny, causing her to blush.

Harry looked a bit sad at the mention of Sirius, but was overwhelmed with excitement over the bike.

"I'll be giving you driving lessons on that bike over the next few weeks," said Lupin. "Padfoot made sure that all of us knew how to drive a motorcycle."

"And I'll be teaching you how to drive a car," said Tonks. "My dad taught me that. For some reason he wouldn't teach me how to drive motorcycles."

Harry was smiling brightly. "Thanks guys!"

"I suppose now's as good a time as any to let you know that Sirius also left you some gold in his will. It's been added to your vault."

Harry took a deep breath. "I, er, guess that's to be expected."

"Open my gift next," said Tonks, quickly changing the subject as she handed him a small badly-wrapped package.

He opened it to find it was a hat that had a visor that protected your eyes from the sun, but no top that covered the top of your head, just the adjustable part that fit around the sides of your head. Harry had never seen something like it before.

"Well, Harry, put it on!" said Tonks excitedly.

He complied and everybody's jaw dropped. "What?" he asked.

Grinning, Tonks said, "I really should've given you this hat before we left," as she conjured a mirror for him to look at.

What he saw was a blonde boy with blue eyes, with no glasses or scars wearing the visor. He laughed. "This is brilliant! Now I don't have to be recognized everywhere I go! Thanks a lot Tonks!"

"I hoped you'd like it."

Harry opened Remus' present next to find a very advanced book on defensive magic, which he happily thanked him for. There was a

package of several types of magical candy from Ron and a book on Occlumency from Hermione with a note asking him to try learning it. Finally, he opened Ginny's present, to find a framed magical picture of herself in fancy dress robes. Harry said, "That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," causing her to blush redder than her hair.

She kissed him and said, "Happy birthday."

Albus then said, "I believe that it's time we were all leaving."

"I'll be here at ten o'clock for your first lesson," said Remus. "The Dursleys would probably prefer if you meet me outside."

After they said their farewells, the visitors left, leaving Harry alone to dream of his wonderful day spent with Ginny.

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## **Chapter 3 – Leaving Privet Drive**

*“Hello Hermione!*

*I’m just writing to thank you for the gift you sent me, and to assure you that I did indeed have a happy birthday. Professor Dumbledore arranged it so that I spent the whole day with Ginny! It was wonderful! We went to a muggle amusement park with Remus and Tonks. I really enjoyed sitting in the rides next to Ginny. She’s so amazing! I tried to win her a Teddy Bear. I don’t know how many times I tried throwing a ball at the target, but when Ginny took one try she got it! She’ll make an awesome Chaser!*

*Dumbledore gave me the motorcycle that used to belong to Sirius, along with two jackets, helmets, and gloves (one for me, one for Ginny). Remus is going to teach me how to drive it. Ginny and I can’t wait to take a ride on it! Tonks will be teaching me how to drive a car, too.*

*Ginny gave me this incredible picture of her. It’s waving at me right now while I’m writing this letter. She’s so beautiful!*

*Oh, and Tonks gave me a cap that disguises me – it changes my hair and eye color, and even hides my scar and glasses – so I can go out in public without being recognized. Ginny thinks I look better without the disguise, but understands that I need it.*

*I have started reading the Occlumency book you sent me. The first page told me more about the subject than Snape ever did! Hopefully I’ll be able to learn it this way. I’d hate to have a vision while I’m with Ginny! I don’t think I’ll have to worry about that though since the visions happen when I’m asleep. I can’t wait until I see Ginny again!*

*Your friend,*

*Harry’*

Hermione read the letter over and over, amazed at how many times Harry mentioned Ginny. Like she was the center of his world. She wondered why that bothered her. She shrugged, figuring it was simply because Harry had only dated Ginny one time. She hoped he

wasn't moving too fast. She'd naturally written Ginny after Harry told her they were dating, and the redhead seemed to feel the same way about Harry that he felt about her.

Hermione did feel a bit hurt that she and Ron hadn't been invited to the amusement park, but knew that Harry hadn't arranged that – Professor Dumbledore had. She supposed he thought Harry would enjoy spending the day with his girlfriend more than with all his friends. She was pleased that he was studying Occlumency now, and that he had a disguise to wear in public. She knew how much he hated being recognized. She took out a piece of paper and a muggle pen to write her friend a quick reply.

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A week later, Harry (in disguise) was just finishing a driving lesson with Tonks in the early afternoon. Tonks was driving him home from the parking lot where he'd been practicing.

"You're a natural, Harry," she said. "You've really learned fast. Next week, I think we'll be able to have you leave the parking lot."

Harry smiled. "Thanks. That'll be nice. Do you think Remus will let me drive my bike to the Burrow?"

Tonks snorted. "You really are in a hurry to see Ginny, aren't you?" He nodded enthusiastically as his cheeks colored slightly. "He tells me that you're doing great at your lessons, but truthfully, I think that's a bit too far for your first road trip, and I think Moony will agree. You will be able to take the bike with you and take short drives with Ginny around their neck of the woods before you go back to school."

He sighed. "I guess. I just hate waiting. My homework's done and I don't have anything to do now since the Dursleys are scared to give me chores."

"Sorry kiddo," she said as she parked the mid-sized car, "Dumbledore said you can't leave just yet."

"Oh well." Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Thanks for the lesson."

"You're welcome Harry. See you later." He got out of the car and walked into his house. Tonks' car was leaving as he opened the door and went up the stairs to his room. He took off his hat, lay in his bed, and grabbed his picture of Ginny.

He had been staring at her picture for about a half hour when he heard a loud crash. He jumped up, pulling his wand, as well as his invisibility cloak, out and left his room. As he cautiously approached the staircase, he heard a familiar female voice cackling over the sound of two people screaming. He guessed from the varying intensities of the screams that Vernon Dursley was under the Cruciatus Curse while Petunia was simply scared. The cackling woman was none other than Bellatrix – Sirius' murderer. As he snuck down the stairs, he saw that he was correct, and that two other masked Death Eaters were with Bella and had their wands pointed at Petunia. Dudley wasn't at the house. He briefly wondered how they'd gotten past the blood wards, but didn't have time to dwell on that. He had to come up with a plan.

He quietly made his way past the Death Eaters while his uncle writhed on the floor, still under the torture curse. He opened the window and then snuck out the open door. Once he was outside, he stuck his wand through the window and whispered, "Expelliarmus!" causing Bellatrix's wand to fly out of her hand. He quickly ducked down, even though he was still covered by the cloak. He was glad he had ducked a moment later when two green beams flew out the window above him, hitting the Dursleys now totaled car.

"Come on in, Little Harry," came the taunting voice of Padfoot's killer, "We know you're out there. You don't want your family hurt, do you?"

While trying to figure out why he wasn't just running away, leaving the Dursleys to their well-deserved fate, he snuck around to the back door and removed his cloak (because it couldn't hide him while he fought) and stuffed it in his back pocket. He wasn't sure if anyone was guarding the inside of that door, so he blasted it off its hinges with a 'Reducto' curse, and smiled when he noticed that someone was thrown backwards under the door. The mask fell off and he saw the unconscious, bleeding face of Goyle, one of Draco's goons. He instantly realized that the other Death Eaters were most likely Draco

Malfoy and Crabbe. He guessed they were being taught by Malfoy's aunt.

He heard someone approaching the kitchen door and released the same curse on it, this time taking out Crabbe.

"Hello Scarhead," said Draco's familiar voice from behind a mask. "I knew you were too stupid to run away. Harry saw Vernon lying unconscious on the ground with a hysterical Petunia crying next to him. Both Draco and Bellatrix were pointing their wands at him. He knew shields would be useless against the curses these people would use.

He dodged to the left just as two beams of light were shot at him. He aimed his wand at Draco and shouted, "Stupefy!" nailing him between the eyes.

Bella shouted, "Crucio!" causing him to jump quickly out of the way, giving her time to "Enervate!" her nephew. "I see you're being a good boy again, Harrikins!" sneered Bella as Draco proudly got up.

"Sectumsempra!" shouted Malfoy, causing a beam of light to shoot at Harry, who dodged but got hit in his left hand, which started bleeding and hurt like hell.

Harry swore under his breath, realizing that he couldn't fight Death Eaters like that. With resolve to do what he had to, he pointed his wand toward Bellatrix, but at the last moment aimed it at Draco shouting, "Reducto!"

He barely stopped himself from vomiting as Draco's surprised head was separated from his body and rolled ten feet behind him.

"You KILLED MY NEPHEW!!!" shouted the deranged killer, "Crucio!"

This time Harry, in shock from what he'd just done, didn't dodge in time, and found himself writhing on the floor, screaming. He didn't know how long he'd been under the curse. He didn't notice his tormentor laughing or his aunt screaming. He did see when Petunia tackled Bellatrix to the ground, causing the curse to be broken. She

still held her wand tightly. She angrily shouted, “Get your hands off me, you filthy muggle!” as she turned her wand on Petunia.

Harry looked around for his wand, but didn’t see it anywhere. He tried to run toward his aunt, but knew he wouldn’t make it on time. He heard the word, “Avada...”

At that moment, he saw Bellatrix getting shot with a red beam from behind and fell over unconscious. Kingsley Shacklebolt walked through the door as he put his wand in a holster. “Mr. Potter, is that all of them?”

It took him a moment to register what he’d been asked. “Um. There’s the two others in here.” He pointed at Crabbe and what was left of Draco. “Oh, and one in the kitchen who I think is unconscious.”

A few more aurors walked into the room as Kingsley went into the kitchen. The aurors were examining the Death Eaters on the floor. One of them, an attractive blonde woman who appeared to be in her early twenties, walked up to him and said, “These are both dead.” Before she said anything else, she noticed his bleeding left hand. “Let me see that hand, Mr. Potter.” When she saw some hesitation in his eyes, she added, “I have some emergency healing training.” He submissively held out his hand to her as she began performing a spell he’d never heard before.

“By the way,” she said when his hand was healed, “My name is Auror Jones. You did great to take out three Death Eaters.” She then smirked, “But of course, we could expect no less from the great Harry Potter, right.” She winked at him. “I heard you did well at the Ministry, too.”

He blushed at the compliment, just as another auror said, “Hey Jones, come over here.” Harry looked to see the older auror bent over Vernon, who was unconscious. Auror Jones performed a spell on Harry’s uncle and frowned at the results.

“How, how is my husband?” asked Petunia, who’d rushed to his side.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Dursley. Your husband suffered a heart attack while he was under the Cruciatus curse. It's too late to help him. He's dead."

Petunia's face went pale, and it looked like she was going to say something, but instead she passed out.

Kingsley walked back into the living room and said, "The other Death Eater is dead as well. Mr. Potter, I'm gonna need your statement. Tell me what happened."

After Harry told the tale, revealing the names of his attackers, Shacklebolt said, "I can promise you that you won't have any problems for performing underage magic, and your uncle's death clearly justifies the force you used against his killers. You shouldn't have any trouble over this. They were in your home attacking your family, and all of them have the Dark Mark."

"Er, thanks. I, er, do appreciate it. Um, how did they get here? Dumbledore said there were some kind of blood wards here that kept me safe."

Kingsley looked confused. "All I detected were some standard wards that are currently down. Nothing else."

"They are undetectable to all but the most powerful wizards," came Dumbledore's voice from the doorway. He looked truly shaken up. "I'm afraid Voldemort himself must have penetrated them. He must have provided your attackers with some of your blood, which flows in his veins. I'm afraid this house is no longer secure. We'll be moving you to headquarters as soon as you can pack." The old man sighed. "There is now no reason for you to return to this house." With a twinkle in his eye, he added, "Why don't you eat this pumpkin pasty while you're packing?"

He stared at his headmaster in disbelief as he took the pastry. "That's it? I can finally leave? Hold on. This place hasn't been safe from me since Voldemort returned! You knew he took my blood!"

"I was hoping he wouldn't realize the kind of wards that were protecting you. Without his direct involvement, they couldn't possibly have gotten in here."

"But if he was directly involved, why didn't he come himself?"

For a brief moment, Albus looked upset. He quickly regained his usual pleasant demeanor. "I'm sorry, Harry, but you can't expect me to understand everything that a psychotic killer does. You don't think I can truly relate to him, do you?"

"Of, of course not, sir. I didn't mean to imply..."

"Quite alright, my boy, quite alright. I'd suggest you get to packing. I'll take you to headquarters and inform the Order of what has happened. I'll also ask them not to question you about the attack. I'm sure you don't want to relive it. By the way, I must say that you defended yourself admirably."

He looked down to the floor. "Not admirably enough. Uncle Vernon died."

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's shoulder in a grandfatherly way. "You mustn't blame yourself for that. At least the rest of your family is fine. That is thanks to you."

"I guess," he said, not convinced. He then started walking toward the stairs.

"Wait, Harry!" He stopped and turned to see his aunt (who'd obviously been revived) walking toward him with tears falling down her eyes. "You were outside, but came back in. Why did you do that?"

"I couldn't just run away," he said nonchalantly.

"Why not? You could have escaped."

"I'm afraid you'll find that young Harry doesn't run away from his battles," said Dumbledore proudly.

Harry blushed at the praise and went up the stairs, shoving the snack in his mouth, and packed.

Ten minutes later, Harry was coming downstairs with his heavy trunk and an empty cage. “I sent Hedwig to Ginny with a brief note,” he said when he noticed his headmaster eying the cage.

“Of course.”

“Er, Professor, what can be done to protect Aunt Petunia and Dudley in case the Death Eaters decide to attack again?”

“I shall put up the strongest wards that I can without you living here,” he promised, “but first, I’ll take you to headquarters.”

“Can’t I go to the Burrow?” asked Harry.

The old man smiled at him. “Perhaps that would be better. Certain wards have been put up around that house to make it as safe as possible. It’s almost as safe as headquarters, and it would be prudent to assure them, specifically Miss Weasley, that you’re alright with more than a note.”

A broad smile formed across Harry’s face as Dumbledore took his hand and they disappeared out of Number Four Privet Drive with a small pop.

## **Chapter 4 – The Aftermath**

“Harry!!!!” shouted Ginny as she tackled him to the ground in a strong embrace.

He and Dumbledore had just arrived after the attack on Privet Drive. While they were on the ground with Ginny on top of Harry, she began kissing him, and he responded passionately.

“GINEVRA MOLLY WEASLEY! You get off Harry this instant! Just because I approve of you dating him doesn’t mean you can start acting like a scarlet woman!”

Albus’ eyes twinkled merrily as Molly berated her daughter. Ginny reluctantly got up and then helped Harry to his feet. Molly instantly hugged Harry tightly.

“We heard about the attack on your home, but didn’t know if you and your family were alright.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Well, my cousin Dudley wasn’t there. Aunt Petunia is shaken up, but fine.” He paused for a moment. “Uncle Vernon is dead.”

“Oh, you poor boy!” Molly said, squeezing him even tighter than before as her daughter joined in the hug.

“He was a git anyway, wasn’t he Harry?”

Molly turned her head to glare at her youngest son. “Ronald Weasley, we do not speak ill of the dead!”

“That’s Snape’s job,” muttered Harry. “He’s always going on about my father.” Ginny slightly smiled at that statement while Ron snorted.

“Be that as it may,” continued Molly, “Vernon Dursley was Harry’s uncle and I’m sure that he is saddened by his loss.” Harry nodded with a frown.

“I’m afraid the Death Eaters have found a way to penetrate the wards at Privet Drive, so there is no longer any reason for him to return,”

said Dumbledore. "What Harry didn't tell you about the battle is how valiantly he fought. He had taken down three of the four attackers before help arrived."

"Great going, Harry!" said both Ron and Ginny while Molly's eyes went wide.

"He's just a boy! Why wasn't he guarded?"

Dumbledore hung his head sadly. "It was Mundungus' turn to guard Harry. I'm afraid that he..."

"DUNG!!!" shouted Ginny. "You let that worthless piece of dung watch Harry after last year with the Dementors!?! What were you thinking?"

"Ginny, show respect to the headmaster!" Molly then turned to Albus. "While I don't agree with the way Ginny expressed it, I do agree with her sentiment. Why did you allow Mundungus guard duty again?"

"He came to me and apologized, promising to do better." He sighed. "It's just my habit of looking for the good in people."

"Still, you shouldn't take those kinds of chances where Harry's life is at stake."

"I suppose you're right, Molly. Is Arthur around?"

"Not yet," she said. "I hate that my clock started pointing at 'Mortal Peril' for everybody when You-Know-Who came out in the open. It's useless now."

"I could change it to 'Immediate Danger' instead," suggested the headmaster. "It should work normally after that."

Molly smiled. "Thank you, Albus. I'd appreciate that." She then got him the clock and he performed a spell on it. The hand for Molly, Ron, and Ginny went to 'Home.' Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Fred, and George's hands went to 'Work.'

"I must go and see Arthur at the Ministry. There will be an Order meeting at Headquarters in two hours, Molly. If you wouldn't mind, could you contact Minerva and have her let everyone know?"

"Of course, Albus."

"Harry will need to go as well, as a witness to the attack. I bid you all a good day."

As soon as Dumbledore left, Ron said, "Tell us what happened, Harry! Who did you capture?"

He miserably answered, "I didn't capture anyone. I killed Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. They all had Dark Marks. Bellatrix was apparently training them. Kingsley captured her just as she was casting the killing curse on my aunt."

"Wow! With the Seeker and both Beaters gone, the Slytherin team will be pushovers..."

"Is Quidditch all you can think about?" yelled Molly as she glared at Ron.

"Harry's just been through a traumatic experience and needs comfort," said Ginny as she put her arms around him again and looked like she was going to kiss him.

"What he needs is good meal," said Molly. "I guess you'll be staying here now."

"Er, if you don't mind..."

"Of course I don't mind, Harry-dear. You're always welcome here. As long as you and Ginny behave yourselves there'll be no problems. Why don't you put your things in Percy's old room while I contact Professor McGonagall?"

-

While Harry was moving his stuff into Percy's old room, Albus had just reached Arthur's new office. He was alone. Dumbledore knocked on the door.

"Hello Albus," said Mr. Weasley as he opened his office door. "Come in."

The aged professor walked inside with a twinkle in his eyes and closed the door. Once they were alone, he pulled his wand out. "Imperio." Arthur's expression went blank under the influence of the curse. Dumbledore was thankful that the ministry restricted its spell monitoring solely toward underage muggleborns. He hoped they'd never decide to monitor for unforgivable curses instead.

"Harry will now be staying with you, so you'll have more responsibilities."

"Yes."

"He's a very powerful wizard, so you'll have to slip a vial of this potion into a drink every day to keep him under its spell. Just to be sure, give one to Ginny every other day as well. It should keep them too distracted to think about...other things." He handed Arthur a case full of vials.

"Yes."

"You will allow Harry and Ginny to go out for romantic rides on his motorcycle. I can track them, so there's no worry about them disappearing. Those trips will help them get closer. If anybody sees you putting the potion in their drinks, you will claim that it was a harmless prank of Fred and George's invention and would turn the victim into a canary."

"Yes."

"You will not remember any of this."

"Yes."

He removed the curse. “Arthur, are you listening to me, or thinking about dinner tonight?”

Mr. Weasley blinked. “What? I’m afraid my mind was wondering.”

“I said there will be an Order meeting at headquarters in an hour and a half.”

-

Harry arrived by floo at the house that used to belong to Sirius. A frown formed on his face as he followed Molly into the dining room.

“What’s he doing here?” sneered Snape, who was seated at the table. Harry tensed up immediately.

“Come now, Severus. Don’t be rude. I invited Harry because he’s a witness to the event I’d like to discuss.”

“That he probably caused.”

Harry felt a slight Legilimens attack coming from Severus and pushed him out angrily, causing the potions master’s head to jolt backwards in surprise. He then glared even harder at Harry, who turned away, knowing he still wasn’t strong enough for a full-out mind attack. Deciding it would be best to ignore Snape, he looked around and smiled when he saw Lupin. He walked up next to the Marauder and sat down.

“Hi, Professor Lupin.”

“Hi Harry. And call me Remus or Moony. I’m not your professor anymore.”

“Okay Moony.” He looked around. “It’s weird to be back here without Sirius.”

“I know. Sirius hated it here, and so do I.”

“So, why don’t you sell it?” asked Harry.

Remus looked at him strangely. "How would I sell it? Didn't Sirius leave it to you?"

"No. He left me some money and a motorcycle. I wonder..."

Albus said, "Actually gentlemen, as you know Sirius was devoted to the cause of destroying Voldemort. Therefore he decided to leave this house to the Order, so he officially left it to me."

"Really?" said a very surprised Lupin. "He told me..."

"But he changed his mind a few days before his tragic death. Anyway, that's not why we're here. I'd like to begin the meeting now."

"Yes, let's," said Snape. "I say have the Potter brat say what he has to say and then leave."

"How dare you, Severus!" exclaimed Molly. "Harry is not a brat! He is one of the kindest, most..."

"While I do agree that Mr. Potter is an exceptional youth, I do believe that for expedience, it would be best to have him talk about the attack on his home so he can get back to the Burrow and rest."

"His house was attacked?" asked Tonks. "I should've known that Dung wouldn't..."

"Now Nymphadora," said Albus, earning a glare from her, "Let's allow Harry to speak. When he's done, I'm sure he'll allow us to ask questions."

All eyes turned on Harry, who cleared his throat. "Well, er, I was in my room when I heard a..." Harry told the whole story from his point of view, and then Kingsley talked about his part. Almost everyone was amazed at Harry's accomplishment.

Snape sneered, "Now that Potter's arrogantly bragged about murdering his fellow students, an act his father and friends nearly accomplished while they were in school, I think he should leave."

"He did not murder them! They were attacking his family!" shouted Minerva. "It was in self defense! They were your students that you never taught right from wrong to! If anyone's to blame, it's you! Those three Slytherins have been..."

"Now Minerva," said Albus firmly, "Now is not the time to place blame. I do, however believe that we have taken up enough of Mr. Potter's time."

Harry got up. "Bye," he said as he made his way out the door and walked to the fireplace, disgusted at Snape. It didn't escape Harry's notice that the headmaster did take all of Snape's suggestions.

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When he arrived at the Burrow, he was in a bad mood.

"Hi Harry!" said Ginny, walking up and kissing him.

He kissed her back half-heartedly. "Hi, Ginny. I've got a letter to write. I should tell Hermione about the attack."

"Can I help? You still haven't told me about it."

"Me too," said Ron from across the room.

"Sure, why not?"

"By the way," said Ginny, "Hedwig arrived with your note a few minutes ago. I guess you didn't know you were coming here yet."

"No, I didn't."

Harry sat down and wrote every detail he could remember, including what was said about the blood wards. The Weasley siblings were in awe how well Harry did in the fight. He voiced his concern about his aunt possibly becoming a target in his letter. He also said that Dumbledore took Snape's advice throughout the part of the meeting he was at. When he finished, he said 'Hi' for Ron and Ginny before attaching it to Hedwig's leg.

After he'd sent the letter, Harry went up to his room and retrieved the bike, along with the gear, from his trunk. He carried it down the stairs. Ginny stared at it in awe while Ron looked at it curiously.

"Is that it?" asked Ginny excitedly bouncing on her feet.

"Yeah!" said Harry with a huge grin. "I think a ride would do me good after today. Would you like to join me?"

"I'd love to!"

As Harry handed his girlfriend a jacket, helmet, and gloves, Ron asked, "What kind of ride are you gonna take on that toy?"

"It's not a toy, Ron, it's shrunk," said Harry. "I'll get it to full size when we get outside."

A few minutes later, when it was back to normal, Ron was staring at it in awe. "Can I have a go?"

"Maybe some other time, but now I'm taking Ginny."

"Why does she..."

"Because I'm his girlfriend!"

Harry got on the bike, and Ginny sat down behind him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. He took off and drove at high speeds along the road toward the nearby town. Once there, he slowed down to avoid getting pulled over. He stopped at a muggle restaurant (Harry put his disguise cap on once he took off his helmet) and got ice cream sodas.

"This has been a lot of fun, Harry!" she said after they finished, staring into his eyes. She noticed that even though they were the wrong color, they still had the same intensity about them. "I'm sorry you were attacked, but I'm glad you're here." She then got up from her chair across the table and walked up to him. She sat on his lap and kissed him thoroughly, earning some catcalls from a few patrons, along with disparaging remarks from others.

The owner, a grumpy-looking old woman, walked up to them. “Excuse me, but we don’t allow those kinds of public displays of affection here. I know you young people...”

“Fine. Sorry,” said Harry, pulling out his wallet. “We were just leaving.” He paid the bill, leaving no tip.

-

When they got back, they found an angry-looking Molly Weasley waiting outside. “Where have you two been, and what is that muggle contraption?”

Putting on his most pathetic face and looking at the ground in penitence, Harry said, “Sorry. It was my fault. I inherited the motorcycle from Sirius, and I wanted to go for a drive. Remus taught me how to drive it and I got a license for it. We wore the helmets for protection.”

“Oh, Molly,” came Arthur’s voice from behind her, “Let them go on their date. I’m sure they didn’t do anything inappropriate. As I recall, you and I took a few rides on broomsticks when we were Harry’s age.”

“But Ginny’s...”

“You know Harry wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. And after today, I have a lot more confidence in Harry’s ability to defend Ginny than most of the Order. I’m sure they had their wands.”

“Of course, daddy.”

“Good. Now why don’t you have some iced tea?” Arthur then handed Harry, Ginny, and Molly cups of tea. Molly noticed that her cup was smaller than the other two, but didn’t comment on it. She figured he knew she had trouble sleeping when she had too much caffeine.

After Harry and Ginny drank their tea, they snuggled together on the couch inside and started kissing.

“Oi! Do you two ever separate your mouths long enough to talk?”

"No Ron, never," said Ginny sarcastically before kissing Harry again.

"I think it's time for bed," called Molly from another room.

"Oh well," said Harry, "Goodnight Ron. Goodnight, Ginny." He kissed her one more time before going to bed.

-

He tore up the scroll that contained the despicable information. "How could that boy kill all three of my new recruits?" he shouted at the small, trembling man who had given him the paper. "Crucio!" The pathetic traitor was shaking on the floor, his silver hand making a 'clang' sound whenever it touched the concrete.

It must have been some kind of trick! That old fool Dumbledore wouldn't have left Potter so unguarded! There were only standard wards on the property! It was too good to be true! There must have been other members of his precious Order waiting inside the house that they didn't tell the Order about! Snape's always going on about how dimwitted and weak Potter is! There's no way he'd have won the battle. I suppose he's hidden now, but his filthy muggle relatives are still there. I'll have Snape kill Potter at Hogwarts. He was begging me to let him last year with those 'remedial potions lessons' but I told him only to torture him and open his mind up more so I could trick him. I'll have Snape volunteer to continue those lessons."

"But Severus wrote that Harry's somehow learning Occlum..."

"He's not a master yet! Crucio!"

The metal hand tapped the floor repeatedly until Harry opened his eyes with his scar burning. He put his left hand over it immediately.

He didn't hear Voldemort's laughter or Wormtail's screams anymore, but he still heard the tapping as he reached for his glasses.

He followed the noise to his window and saw Hedwig tapping it with her beak. It looked like she was carrying a letter. He got up, let her in, and took the letter. It was from Hermione.

*"Dear Harry,*

*I'm so sorry to hear about your uncle. I know you didn't get along very well, but you may wish to consider attending the funeral. You could send Hedwig to your aunt or ask an Order member to escort you to her house to find out. You fought bravely and what happened was not your fault! So don't blame yourself.*

*I do think that it's strange that Auror Kingsley didn't detect any wards and that Professor Dumbledore claimed that only extremely powerful wizards could detect them. I've never read about wards that couldn't be detected at all. Even if the person didn't know how to get past them, they should have detected something. However, from what the headmaster told you about the wards, they are unique, and I'll try to find books about them. But honestly, if only Voldemort could detect them, he'd have been there to detect them. Why would he leave? He's always taken a personal interest in you.*

*I think your concerns about Mrs. Dursley and Dudley are correct and they should move away. You should advise them to do so. Knowing how generous you are, you'll probably want to help them. I suggest you talk to a Gringotts goblin to find out how much money you have before you give away your last Galleon. Don't give away what you don't have, and make sure you have plenty left over for yourself.*

*I hope you enjoy your time at the Weasleys. Don't rush things with your new girlfriend. That can ruin a relationship. I'll be arriving at the Burrow a few weeks before summer's over. See you then.*

*Love from*

*Hermione."*

## Chapter 5 – Financial Manipulations

Harry smiled to himself at the last bit of advice Hermione gave him about not rushing things with Ginny. Almost every letter she'd sent him that summer said something like that. She was always looking out for him. The vision he'd just woken up from convinced Harry of a few things. One is that the 'blood wards' Dumbledore talked about didn't exist. The other is that Snape is a spy on Voldemort's side. He also knew it was possible that the vision was false, but really couldn't imagine its purpose. He decided to wait until he had actual proof to do anything about it, but he would **NOT** take any private lessons with Snape.

Harry also decided that if he was going to accomplish half of what he planned, he'd have to get started now. He grabbed some clothes and took a quick shower. He skipped breakfast, intending on getting lunch in London. As he wrote a quick note to the Weasleys, he briefly considered waking up Ginny, but decided against it. He was in a hurry and didn't want anyone to stop him. He took his miniaturized motorcycle (and accessories) and wore his disguise hat with him as he left the Burrow by floo, announcing his destination very clearly as, "Diagon Alley."

-

After dusting himself off and getting up, Harry was happy to find that he was inside the Leaky Cauldron. Making sure his hat was still on, he happily walked out the back door of the pub, glad that no one could recognize him. He tapped his wand on the bricks in the appropriate pattern and walked toward Gringotts, hoping they were open that early.

Before he'd gotten too far, he noticed a sign that made him smile. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes stood out from every other shop in that area. Set against the dull, poster-muffled shop fronts around them, Fred and George's windows hit the eye like a firework display. He had to check it out, figuring that he had a few minutes to spare. "Besides," he muttered to himself, "It'll be a great way to test out my disguise."

As he was approaching the door, he noticed a display of a product called 'U-NO-POO' and started to laugh. He was still laughing as he walked inside.

"Harry!" said one of the twins, causing him to turn toward the one who'd called his name. "Sorry," said George. "Your laugh reminded me of one of our friends. What can I do for you?"

Trying to disguise his voice a bit and change his demeanor, he stuttered, "Er, um, hi, I've n-never been to a joke sh-shop before. C-could I h-have a tour."

"Of course, sir," he said happily. "I'm sure you'll be impressed. Verity!"

A young witch with short blonde hair walked up to them. "Yes."

"Would you be so kind as to show this customer around? He's never been to a joke shop before."

"Of course. Right this way, sir."

Harry was happy that their employee was showing him around. It allowed him to let down his guard a bit, but not much. He recognized most of the products from Hogwarts and was pleased with the new products as well. He purchased ten Galleons worth of merchandise, including extendable ears and skiving snackboxes.

Knowing how much help they'd be, he bought Hermione a set of self-inking quills, and then decided to buy some for himself, Ginny, and Ron, figuring they were as convenient as muggle pens. He decided to buy Ginny a Pygmy Puff for her quickly-approaching birthday on the way back, but didn't want it with him while he was out. After paying Verity for his purchases, he left and resumed his journey to Gringotts, carrying a bag with 'WWW' written in big flashing letters that kept changing colors. He was very pleased with himself for not getting recognized.

-

"May I help you?" asked the goblin behind the counter.

"Yes. May I speak to someone about my account?"

"Of course, sir. You may wait in that room. Someone will be with you shortly." The goblin pointed Harry toward a small private room.

He walked into the room and found a desk with one chair behind it and two chairs in front of it. He sat in one of the two chairs, glad that it was padded and comfortable. When a goblin entered, Harry stood up. "Griphook," he said, extending his hand.

Griphook stared at him in disbelief. "You remember my name?" he asked, shaking Harry's hand.

"Of course. You took me to my vault the first time I was here."

"I'm honored. Most wizards can't tell one goblin from another. What may I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was surprised. He hadn't removed his hat yet, although he had intended to. "Y-you know..."

"Goblins can see through most wizarding disguises," Griphook said, chuckling. "Many of our clients use disguises for various reasons."

"Well," said Harry, taking a deep breath. "I'd like to know exactly what I inherited from Sirius Black. Professor Dumbledore said Sirius left me a few Galleons. I'd like to find out exactly what my assets are. I have some muggle relatives that I believe Voldemort is targeting, and would like to help them relocate, if I have enough money."

"Very well, Mr. Potter," said Griphook, waving his hand (claw). A silver device that looked like a funnel on top of a printer with a dozen different colored buttons on it appeared on the desk, along with a small knife. "Simply get a drop of your blood into the funnel. Most clients simply prick their index finger. I'll be able to heal the wound immediately."

Harry took the knife and hesitantly cut his left index finger. He was surprised that it didn't hurt much as a crimson drop landed in the funnel and disappeared as a beep came from the device.

"That means that it accepted your blood," said the goblin as he waved his hand, healing Harry's wound. Griphook pushed four of the buttons and printed parchment started coming out of the machine. Once the four reports were done printing, the goblin patiently explained them.

"This first report lists your most recent inherited property, which is from the Black estate. You inherited five million Galleons, a motorcycle, several personal items that have been moved into your trust vault, and a mansion located at Number Tw-tw. Ah, a Fidelius charm is in place. You've inherited Black Manor, a property located in London."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What!?! Dumbledore said he'd been left the house!"

"Let me print a copy of the will." Griphook pushed another button and looked over the parchment that came out of the printer. "No. He left Dumbledore one Galleon and advised him to stop interfering with your affairs like he did after your parents died."

To say Harry was shocked would have been an understatement. "He lied to both Lupin and I! What, did he think I wouldn't let them have their meetings there? He's the Secret-Keeper! How do I get the house back? What else has that liar done?"

Unrolling another scroll, Griphook continued. "As the owner of the house, you can magically claim it and the control of all charms and protections on the house will be transferred to you. I believe that you'd be able to cancel the Fidelius Charm at that time. Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with wizarding magic, so you'll have to find a book on how to claim a house. As for what else he's done, the answer is on this scroll. According to this transaction report, he's made a monthly withdrawal of a thousand Galleons from your vault every month since your parents' deaths."

"What? How? Does that have something to do with my Hogwarts tuition?"

"No. That's an annual deduction that you can see right here." He pointed out the appropriate lines on the scroll. "As to how, I'm not sure. There's only one key to each of your vaults, so he..."

"Vaults?" Harry interrupted. "I only know about one vault. The one Hagrid gave me the key for on my eleventh birthday."

"Well, that explains how he's gotten access," said Griphook with a look of relief. "I was afraid he'd found a way to copy our keys. We can solve that easily." He pushed another button and three vault keys, along with six house keys, appeared in front of the printer. "All existing copies of these keys just disappeared as these replacement keys appeared. The vault keys can't be copied, but the house keys can be if you need to. I believe even muggles can copy those keys. You have three vaults. I think it's a good time to look at your assets." He picked up another scroll and unrolled it.

"So, what do I own?"

"The contents of your three vaults, two mansions, four houses, a motorcycle, and property in Godric's Hollow. Your trust vault currently has 14,382 Galleons 5 Sickles and 3 Knuts. It had 15,000 Galleons the first time you made a withdrawal. With your latest inheritance, the Potter vault now has 25,465,890 Galleons 6 Sickles and 1 Knut. That's after the 176,000 Galleons that Professor Dumbledore has withdrawn over the years. The Potter Heirloom vault has no money in it. Instead, it has several items of either monetary or sentimental value – or both. Here's a complete list of the items." He set down the last scroll in front of the shell-shocked sixteen year old.

After thirty seconds of silence, Harry broke the silence. "Er, um, you said houses?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are any of them muggle? I mean with electricity and stuff. Oh, and do other people know about them?"

"No one but a Potter can get the information from us, and according to the information written here, only Potter Manor was registered with the Ministry. I'm afraid we don't have information on whether the houses have muggle technology or not, but they are all in muggle neighborhoods. We do have addresses and appraised values."

"Thanks for that. I'll need to withdraw some money. Both muggle and wizarding." He took a deep breath. "If I've got that much money, I might as well get some decent clothes."

"I believe I can help you there. I can give you what appears to be a muggle credit card that will withdraw directly from the Potter vault. We charge ten Galleons to set it up, and one knut per transaction after that. I'm afraid that most wizarding establishments won't take that, but I can give you a bottomless weightless pouch that only you can open. You can put as many Galleons as you want in it. We would have it directly take money from your vault, but we don't want to risk a dark wizard managing to steal that and emptying your vault. Most of them wouldn't know a credit card if they saw one, and they wouldn't be able to use it in the only world that matters to them anyway."

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After getting the Gringotts card (that looked like a regular visa) and withdrawing 1,000 Galleons from his vault (and putting it in his new pouch), Harry (still in disguise) walked around Diagon Alley.

He was excited to have so much money, but more than that, he was fuming. He wanted to go back to Dumbledore's office and break the desk itself, followed by Dumbledore's crooked nose. He did his best to rein his temper in so that he could accomplish what he wanted for the day.

He decided to buy a magical trunk with several compartments like Mad-Eye's that could shrink down to a wallet. He could even store things like his credit card in the wallet, so he emptied his old one into it. As both a wallet and a trunk, it was charmed so that only he could open it. He figured it would come in handy for everything he was planning on buying that day. He then bought some wizarding robes, including new dress robes. He bought a wand holster that resists the summoning charm, and he bought a few books from Flourish and Blotts, including one on ancient wizarding homes, which talked about the magical transferring of ownership, among other things. He then walked out of Diagon Alley and drove his motorcycle to the muggle world.

He stopped by a department store and bought all new clothes for himself with his visa, changing into one of his new outfits at the store and putting the rest of his packages into his trunk once he was out of sight. He didn't get elegant clothes that would bring attention to him – just new clothes that were his size. He was currently wearing jeans and a t-shirt that said 'Stop reading my t-shirt!'

After that he went to an eye doctor to 'get new glasses in an hour.' After his exam, where he found out that he should have gotten new glasses years ago, he picked out two wire frames. He'd decided to get one pair of regular glasses, and a pair of prescription sunglasses. He'd considered transition lenses, but he wanted control over when he was and wasn't wearing sunglasses. He knew that Snape would take 1,000 points from Gryffindor if Harry was wearing sunglasses in class, whether it was against school rules or not. Although he had a slight headache from his new prescription, he could see better than he had in a long time as he rode his bike to the first house on his list.

It was a red brick home that certainly looked normal to him. It was a two story house with a garage. He tried out his keys, and the third one he tried fit in the door. He smiled when he saw a light switch, and turned it on. To his surprise, it worked. The house seemed a bit dusty, but other than that, it was in good order. He walked around and found a phone on the wall. He picked it up and got a dial tone. On a hunch, he pulled the scrolls out of his pocket and found his expenditures. He noticed that a varying amount was transferred every month to a muggle bank account. He was willing to bet that it paid the utility and phone bills for his houses, but decided to double-check it. He further inspected it to make sure the plumbing worked properly, and that the four bedrooms were in good order. He thought the place would be perfect for Aunt Petunia and Dudley, so he decided to wait on inspecting his other houses.

He then drove to a local branch of the bank where the money had been transferred and asked to speak to a representative. He decided to not use his disguise hat in the bank in case he needed to use his driver's license for identification.

"Hello, Mr?"

"Potter, ma'am. Harry Potter."

"It's good to meet you," said the African woman, reaching out and shaking his hand. "What can I do for you? Were you considering opening up an account here?"

"Er, actually..." Suddenly he became nervous. "Well, my parents died when I was a baby and I've been using a trust fund at another bank for a long time now. I just learned about another account that my family has there. I was looking at the records for that account and noticed that some money is transferred to an account at this bank every month. I wanted to know why."

"I see. I'm not sure if I'll be able to tell you too much about the account if it's not yours, but I can certainly take a look. Do you have the account number?"

He gave her the number and she typed it into her computer. A moment after she entered it, she smiled. "That account was owned by James and Lily Potter. You were the beneficiary."

"May I have a report on that account?"

"I'll have to see your i.d. before I can do that."

He showed her his driver's license and she printed out a report. As he suspected, every month there was a withdrawal from both the phone company and the utility company. There was an extra thousand pounds in the account. He wasn't sure how it was set up to be replenished, but he decided to leave things as they were. She updated the information on the account and asked him for an address. He gave her the address of the house he'd just checked, but said that it might change soon. He then went to lunch at a McDonalds and drove to Number Four Privet Drive, making one stop at a hardware store to have a key copied.

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Petunia and Dudley Dursley were sitting together on a couch in the living room watching the tele when the doorbell rang. It had been a difficult task yesterday for Mrs. Dursley informing her son that his

father was dead when he came home after spending the day ‘having tea’ with his gang. They’d both been walking around in a daze ever since, although Petunia had made arrangements with a funeral home that morning. She got up and answered the door.

“Hello Aunt Petunia,” said the young man who was standing outside her door wearing sunglasses, jeans and a dark-green leather jacket. He wasn’t in disguise, so she could see his scar and dark hair. She couldn’t help but notice the motorcycle parked in her driveway.

“H-Harry? What are you doing here?”

He sighed. “May I come in to explain?”

“Of course.”

Before Harry had taken two steps into the house, Dudley shouted, “What are you doing here, freak! It’s not enough you got my father killed. Now you want to do the same to us!”

Harry’s guilt over Uncle Vernon’s death outweighed his anger over Dudley’s statement. “You’re right, they were after me, but I’m not taking all the blame! The house was supposed to be guarded against an attack, both by a wizard and special magical wards. Neither was there, thanks to Dumbledore! He had the same guard who left his post a year ago when we were attacked by those Dementors and I think he was just lying about those wards to keep me here! I just don’t know why!”

“He, he promised protection in the letter he left with you!” said Petunia.

“He obviously lied about that!” Harry took a deep breath. “I have very good reason to believe that this house will be attacked again, soon.”

“What?” said both Petunia and Dudley together, looking terrified.  
“Why?” asked Petunia.

“Because for better or worse, you’re my only family. Not to mention the fact that he wants revenge for the Death Eaters that were

captured and killed yesterday. Anyway, I've got a house that no one knows about that I'd like you to move to."

"Where'd you get a house, freak?" asked Dudley sarcastically.

"Actually," said Harry, glaring at Dudley. "I just found out that my parents left me a lot more than I've been led to believe, including that house. I've just been there. It's in good order, but is kind of dusty. It has electricity and phone service, although I'd advise you not to give the address out." He turned to his aunt. "Are you coming?"

"Yes. We'll need to get packed."

"Just take the essentials. I can get an 'of age' wizard to come here later to magically pack everything else."

"Alright. You're not planning on us all riding that...thing you brought here, are you?"

"No. You follow me in your car. By the way, here's a key for the house."

"You said it was dusty. I'll need my vacuum and duster. Probably all my cleaning supplies."

"I just wish Dobby were here. He could make things a lot easier."

His aunt looked confused. "Who's Dob...?"

"Harry Potter called Dobby, and Dobby came!" exclaimed the excited house elf who just appeared with a 'pop.' He immediately hugged Harry. "Dobby is sorry Dobby is taking so long to answer Harry Potter. Dobby is having to take care of Winky."

"Is she still drinking?" he asked with a frown.

"Harry Potter is a great wizard to be caring about the problems of elves! Dobby is afraid Winky isn't stopping drinking until she is bonding with another family. But that's enough of Dobby's problems. Why is Harry Potter calling Dobby?"

"I'm moving my aunt and cousin someplace that has to be kept a secret, and I was hoping you could pack all their stuff and move it there."

"Dobby is happy to!" he said eagerly. "Where is they moving to?"

Harry told Dobby the address and he snapped his fingers. The hose was suddenly empty of everything except for the occupants. Dudley was still sitting on the couch when it disappeared and fell to the floor. Harry let out a snort. Harry briefly thought about hiring Dobby and Winky, but didn't want to upset Hermione. He'd talk to her about it first.

They left soon afterward, and Petunia drove her car (despite Dudley's license and history of being spoiled, she honestly was scared to ride in the car with him driving) and followed Harry to the new house.

"Harry Potter, you has come!" he said excitedly when they opened the door. "Dobby is waiting for you! Dobby is cleaning the house and arranging the furniture exactly the way it had been on Privet Drive!"

"That's good, Dobby. Thank you very much. How much do I owe you for your help today?" Harry pulled out his new pouch.

"Oh, no. Dobby isn't taking money from Harry Potter who is freeing him!"

"But if Hermione finds out I had you do all this good work for nothing, she'll never speak to me again. I insist you take a few Galleons. Think of how many socks and other clothes you can buy with it." He pulled out five Galleons and handed them to Dobby, who immediately started crying.

"Harry Potter is too generous! Dobby cannot accept it!"

"Then give it away to the needy. I don't want the money back. I've got to go. The Weasleys will probably be mad at me for leaving without telling them. Goodbye Dobby, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley. Dobby, would you mind getting Aunt Petunia's mail from Privet Drive every morning at ten and bringing it here?" The house-elf nodded. "Thanks. Aunt Petunia, do you think it would be alright for me to come to the

funeral? I won't if you think it would be best. I know how Aunt Marge feels and what you've told everyone about me. I don't want everyone uncomfortable there, thinking I'm about to rob them." He wanted to add, "When it's Dudley who's likely to do that," but thought better of it.

Petunia hung her head down in shame at the lies they'd spread about her nephew, and realized he had a point. "I, I suppose it would cause trouble at the funeral. If you want, you can go to the wake tomorrow between ten and two. Marge won't be able to make it there." She then told him where it would be held.

"Before I go, do you need anything? Do you have enough money for groceries and things?"

"Oh, yes. We've been able to save a good amount of money over the years, and Vernon's insurance will take care of the funeral cost. I suppose I should try to get a job."

"Er, for now I think it would be best if there were no record of you being in this area, including a job record. I'd suggest that you don't use a bank or a check in this town. Withdraw money somewhere else so that if the Death Eaters ever get the idea to check banking records they won't find you. I'll have some money transferred to your account soon since you can't work. How much do you think you'll need for groceries each month?"

After he'd found out the information, he drove his bike back to Diagon Alley. While he was on his way, he realized that he wasn't that far from the Granger residence. He thought to himself, 'Maybe I can get Hermione to go for a ride with me.' As a smile crept onto his face at the thought of Hermione's arms around his waist as they rode, he shook his head. 'No. Ginny's my girlfriend. I don't have any desire to have her wrap her arms around me tightly or to see her in a ...No! She's my best friend and I already have a girlfriend! I don't feel any differently about her than I do Ron! Although she's much more... Stop it!' He increased his speed and changed his train of thoughts.

He began considering what Dumbledore had done for (or to) him all his life, besides taking that money. Dumbledore knew that Sirius was his godfather, yet instead of giving baby Harry to him, he put him on the doorstep of the Dursleys. The next day Sirius went after Pettigrew

and didn't get a fair trial. Harry realized that the head of the Wizengamot could have demanded a trial if he'd wanted to.

Then Dumbledore did nothing for ten years while Mrs. Figg reported that he couldn't even have a babysitter he liked. Harry would never forget the squib admitting that was why she made him endure looking at pictures of dead cats. Harry's first Hogwarts letter was addressed to 'the cupboard under the stairs,' which meant to Harry that the headmaster knew something was wrong.

Although he loved his invisibility cloak, Harry wondered what kind of headmaster would give one to a student. He also wondered what kind of a headmaster would use a school full of children to house the stone that Voldemort was after. They're lucky he didn't kill every student in the school when he went after the stone! He further wondered how Dumbledore expected traps that three first-years could get through to stop Voldemort. Then the headmaster kindly refused to answer Harry's questions after he woke up in the hospital wing, claiming he was too young.

If Harry were honest to himself, the prophecy was a burden, but he'd always known Voldemort was after him anyway. At least now he knew why. If Dumbledore had answered Harry then, he'd have started training. Maybe he could've done better against Riddle in the graveyard if he'd have trained for three years. Dumbledore didn't even make sure to have good defense teachers most years.

That brought him to a new topic – the teachers. Most of them were alright, but a few weren't. Every defense teacher so far had tried to attack Harry. Lupin had an excuse because he was a werewolf when he'd attacked, and actually was an excellent teacher when the full moon wasn't out. Harry didn't believe Snape was on their side, but even if he was, that's no reason to make him a teacher! Although Harry and Neville held special places in Snape's heart, he harassed everyone not in Slytherin, including good students like Hermione. He never taught! He just put instructions on the board and insulted everybody. Harry still couldn't get over how much easier it was to make a potion during the O.W.L. exam when Snape wasn't around. Why did Dumbledore give him that position? He could have simply

hired him to make potions if he wanted to help Snape – not make him a teacher. And certainly not make him a head of house!

Harry knew that the only reason Trelawney was at Hogwarts was because of the prophecy, not her ‘teaching ability.’ She may have given a few real prophecies, but they had nothing to do with tea leaves, crystal balls, or any of the other rubbish she talks about. According to McGonagall, she predicts the death of a student on the first class of every year. Couldn’t Dumbledore at least ask her to ‘Keep it to yourself when your inner-eye reveals that one of the students is in mortal peril?’

Then there was Binns who had bored countless generations with goblin rebellions that would have been interesting taught by anyone else. Couldn’t Dumbledore force him to retire? As far as Harry knew, Binns was the only ghost in the world with a job. Although Harry hadn’t taken Muggle Studies, Hermione told him that it wasn’t taught properly either. The instructor didn’t know the first thing about modern muggle life, and passed on his ignorance to his students. A muggleborn who’s lived in the muggle world would be the right person to teach that class, not the pureblood who held the position.

Harry also wondered why a squib who desperately wants to torture students would be the caretaker. First of all, with that attitude Filch should be locked away in the mental patients ward at St. Mungo’s. Secondly, a wizard could clean the castle much more quickly and efficiently with spells rather than a mop.

In fourth year, Dumbledore had forced (or had allowed others to force) Harry to participate in the tournament, exposing him to great danger, and eventually leading to Voldemort’s return. Harry knew that Dumbledore could have put a stop to it if he wanted to.

Before fifth year started, Harry had been denied being a prefect. Not that Harry cared so much for the position, but being made a prefect would have shown everybody that Dumbledore had faith in him no matter what the Daily Prophet was saying. At the same time, he made Draco, the most evil Slytherin at Hogwarts, a prefect. The headmaster should have chosen someone like Zabini who wasn’t outspokenly evil, calling Hermione a mudblood in front of everybody.

Besides, he's the only Slytherin boy in his year Harry could think of who wasn't the son of a Death Eater from Voldemort's inner-circle. By giving Draco a prefect's badge, he was encouraging Malfoy to bully children. Did he really think that ferret wouldn't abuse the position?

Harry strongly suspected that Dumbledore could have stopped Umbridge, or at least slowed her down, but he couldn't prove that. It took a brilliant person like Hermione to realize that all that needed to be done was to lead her into the forest. Harry really wished Albus hadn't rescued that toad from the centaurs.

Then he makes Harry take private lessons with Snape, whose constant abuse of Harry is well known throughout Hogwarts. Why would the headmaster expose him to that? Was he so stupid that he believed Snape wouldn't use those lessons to make Harry miserable. Snape had proven time and time again that he is completely incapable of behaving like a professional in the classroom. Why would he do so in his office? If Harry's vision was true, he's just lucky Voldemort didn't let Snape kill him. He chuckled at the thought that Voldemort had protected Harry from Dumbledore's stupidity.

Snape had found out during those lessons that Harry was dreaming of the Department of Mysteries. If he were against Voldemort, couldn't he have said, "Voldemort probably wants to lure you there and may try sending a false vision. If he does, don't go there." Would that have been so hard? Bitterly, Harry thought, 'It would have saved Sirius' life.'

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He arrived at the Leaky Cauldron a few minutes later. He remembered to pick up the pygmy puff for Ginny, as well as a dozen roses. He was feeling guilty about his thoughts regarding Hermione. He also got some carnations for Mrs. Weasley. He thought of buying Hermione some flowers as well, but resisted the idea.

He arrived at the Burrow at about 4 p.m. While he was shrinking down his motorcycle, two arms wrapped around him from behind.

"Hi, honey," said Ginny. "Nice pants. Where have you been? I... You got new glasses, too! They look great!" She kissed him thoroughly.

He didn't know what was wrong, but it didn't feel quite the same as last time. He still enjoyed getting kissed and kissing her back, but somehow his heart wasn't in it. He thought maybe he was exhausted or feeling down because of the business with the Dursleys.

Being a dutiful boyfriend, he smiled at her. "I bought you a few things." With her following close behind, he went inside and to his room. He expanded his trunk so he could remove his purchases. He first pulled out the dozen roses he'd bought her.

"You're forgiven for leaving without me," she said happily as she took them, giving him a quick kiss.

"I also got you a birthday gift that can't wait a few days, and wouldn't appreciate getting wrapped up." He produced the pygmy puff from his jacket pocket and his girlfriend squealed with delight. He then pulled out a bag from the twins' shop. "This should be everything you need to take care of him."

"He's so cute! You got him from Fred and George's shop?" He nodded with a smirk. "You should have told me you were going there! I would've wanted to see them!"

"I didn't plan it. I had some business at Gringotts and noticed the shop on the way. I couldn't resist going in. I was in disguise, so they never knew I was there."

She laughed. "They'd have probably given you a discount."

"But I wanted to test my disguise. If I could fool them, I could fool anyone. Here are some self-inking quills. I bought some for me, you, Ron, and Hermione. I thought they'd be helpful. Is your mum mad at me for leaving like that?"

Her expression changed to fear. "She's been going spare. She's been calling everyone. She went to headquarters a few minutes ago to see if you'd gone there. She should be back..."

"Harry, where have you been?" Harry was suddenly reminded of the howler Ron had received years before as Molly Weasley's voice came from the doorway. "You left a note that only said you'd left, but

not where you were going! What if you were found without a guard? What if..."

"I didn't want there to be any chance of Voldemort finding me! I'm sorry that you worried, but I couldn't risk letting anyone know where I was going. I..." He put on a sad face. He had decided not to tell the Weasleys what he'd learned about Dumbledore or his money. He didn't even want to tell Ginny. Maybe he'd let Hermione know. She could help him. "I went to see the Dursleys to find out about my uncle's funeral. We...talked for awhile and I lost track of time. I did a bit of shopping while I was out as well. I, I wanted to have nice clothes to wear to the wake tomorrow."

Inwardly he believed he deserved an Oscar. Molly had tears in her eyes. He then pulled out the carnations. "I wanted to thank you for your hospitality, and apologize properly for worrying you."

Molly sniffed the flowers and pulled Harry into a hug. "It's alright dear. I just like to know that you're safe. Dinner will be ready in half an hour." She turned around and walked off.

Ginny looked at him skeptically. "Is that where you went?"

He decided to be a bit more honest with Ginny. "Well, I did see the Dursleys. I, er, suggested that they move away so they don't get attacked again. I first went to Gringotts to get money to...help them out a bit with the move. That reminds me, I have to send out a few letters." He planned on writing Gringotts about the transfer to the Dursley account and to Hermione about Dumbledore's manipulations.

"Harry," came Arthur's voice from the doorway. He was holding a few glasses of tea. "Molly sent me up here to give you both a cup of tea. I heard you gave Molly a fright."

"I'm sorry about that," said Harry as he took a glass for himself and Ginny. "I had some important things to do. Tomorrow I have to go to my uncle's wake." Harry drank deeply from his cup. "I really am very thirsty." He felt himself calm down as he took his second drink.

"Dumbledore is downstairs," said Arthur. "He wants to speak with you."

"Okay. I'd like to speak to him, too."

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Harry reached the bottom of the staircase and saw the old man standing, looking straight at him. Harry felt his anger rise, but as he took another drink of his tea, the anger subsided.

"Hello Harry," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "Might I have a word in private?"

"Of course."

They walked into an unoccupied room and Harry began, for some reason struggling to maintain his anger.

"Professor, I went to Gringotts today, and found out that I own Grimmauld Place, not you. I also found out you've been taking a thousand Galleons out of the Potter account every month since my parents died."

Albus was genuinely surprised, but did not show it. "I see. Could you take a seat, and I shall explain it. I'm sure you'll understand in a minute. Would you like a pumpkin pasty?"

"No, I don't want a snack. I want an explanation." Harry took another drink, emptying the glass.

Albus was beginning to panic. Harry was even more powerful than he thought. "Arthur, would you bring more tea?" he called out loudly.

"Sure," came Mr. Weasley's voice from the other side of the door. "Just a minute."

"Now Harry, I'm sorry that I didn't inform you of those withdrawals, but I didn't want you worried. You know that I always have your best interests at heart." Dumbledore was searching his mind for a plausible answer to why he stole Harry's money. "Protection. Yes. I've been paying Mrs. Figg to watch over you since you were placed in the Dursleys' care. Now that you're no longer living with them, her

services are no longer required, so the withdrawals will no longer occur.”

Arthur entered the room at that time and handed out the drinks, giving Harry a glass first.

Once he was gone, Albus continued, delighted that Harry was drinking deeply. “You must realize how hard it for squibs to find a suitable occupation, and I knew you’d want to help her if you realized the situation, so I took the liberty of doing so. I should have let you know before now and allowed you to share in the joy of helping someone else.”

As Harry, who really was genuinely thirsty, listened, he wasn’t sure whether he believed Dumbledore or not, but it did sound plausible. He decided to give Dumbledore the benefit of the doubt for now, but would ask Mrs. Figg if he saw her again. “I see.”

Dumbledore then put his head down in mock-shame. “I must admit I lied about Sirius’ house. I know how you feel about Professor Snape, and was afraid you wouldn’t allow that important member of the Order entrance. To a lesser degree, I was afraid you wouldn’t allow us to use the house without keeping you apprised of everything we’re doing. Knowing your connection to Voldemort, we can’t risk his running across that information. That brings me to the reason for this visit.”

“And that is?”

“After much prodding on my part, Professor Snape has agreed to resume your Occlumency lessons when school starts. They will continue to be referred to as Remedial Potions.”

“No, sir!”

“But you must learn...”

“I’m sorry, but I refuse to share my memories with him. He didn’t teach me anything last year. Hermione gave me a book on it, and I learned more from the first page than he ever taught me! I am working on it, and will continue to practice, but I absolutely refuse to

continue those lessons with Snape!" Harry did not understand why it had been so difficult to refuse the headmaster, but he knew Snape would kill him. He set down his glass, waiting for Dumbledore's response.

Albus was shocked. He didn't think it was possible for anybody to say no to anything with that much potion in them. It was a special formula that he and Snape had created together, and combined a love potion for Ginny with a loyalty potion for him. He was afraid that if he pushed this matter, all the work he'd done would be destroyed, and Harry would completely fight off the potion.

He sighed as though disappointed in Harry. "If that's the way you feel about it, I'll inform Professor Snape. I doubt I'll be able to persuade him again if you change your mind."

"That's fine. I won't change my mind."

"Very well. I must have a quick word with Arthur, and then I'll be leaving. I'll see you at school, if not sooner."

"Goodbye, sir."

After Dumbledore was out of the room, Harry had a sudden urge to snog Ginny senseless.

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## Chapter 6 – Vernon Dursley’s Wake

The next day, Harry, Ginny, Molly, Tonks, and Moony went to the funeral home for Uncle Vernon’s wake. They’d portkeyed to a nearby alley a few minutes early and walked the rest of the way. Arthur had been called in to work early before Harry and Ginny had awakened. Upon Harry’s insistence, all but Ginny had stayed in the foyer while he and his girlfriend went into the actual room where the visitation was being held.

Harry took a deep breath and stood proudly as he took Ginny’s hand. He was wearing a black suit with a black shirt and burgundy tie. His hair, as usual, was a mess, but it suited him. Ginny was wearing a sleeveless black dress that he thought was a bit too low on top and a bit too high on the bottom. He wasn’t complaining. He had to admit he liked what he saw, but just thought it was too revealing. He wisely decided not to say anything about it. After all, he was no expert on women’s fashions.

Together, the couple walked into the room, and he looked around at the twenty or so people who had come to pay their final respects to Vernon Dursley. He recognized some of the people who were talking in groups of three or four as people that his uncle had worked with and brought to the house once or twice. Of course, he’d been stuck in the cupboard when he saw them through the vent, so they didn’t know about him. With the exception of the incident with Dobby before his second year at Hogwarts, he hadn’t seen any of the house guests since he’d been moved to Dudley’s second bedroom because he’d been locked in it when they had company.

He noticed a few people from Privet Drive that appeared to become nervous when they spotted him. Obviously they’d heard the rumors about him. As he was signing the registry, he whispered, “I’ll bet if I walked up to them and said ‘boo’ they’d wet themselves.”

Ginny giggled for a moment before replying, “So, what are we waiting for?”

Smiling at the idea, he continued surveying the room until he spotted his aunt. “Hello, Aunt Petunia. This is my girlfriend, Ginny Weasley. You’ve met her before on my birthday.”

"Yes, of course," she said sadly. "Thank you both for coming."

"Where's Dudley?" he asked, having noticed that his cousin wasn't in the room.

"He left about a half-hour ago to have tea with one of his friends. He should be back in a few hours."

After some more small talk, wherein he'd found out that Auror Jones had repaired the Dursleys' car from spell damage after the attack at the house, he walked up to the casket alone and looked at his uncle's remains. He thought to himself that he still looked terrified from the torture curse he'd been subjected to. Harry sighed and quietly spoke.

"Uncle Vernon, you never treated me fairly, and I resented it. I suppose from your perspective it wasn't fair to you to be forced to raise me, but it wouldn't have hurt you to at least pretend you, you loved me. I've never known what it's like to be loved, thanks to you." Tears were slowly forming in his eyes. "I remember when I was younger; I always tried to please you. But no matter what I did, it wasn't good enough. You always said I'd be the death of you...and I guess...in a way, I was. I'm s-s-sorry Uncle Vernon. I didn't mean for this to happen. In a way, despite everything you've done...I loved you."

He turned around and marched quickly toward the door, leaving Ginny watching him from one of the chairs. He didn't see her get up to follow him.

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He walked past his Order guard and looked around for a loo where he could wash his face and regain his composure. When he saw the sign for the men's room, he turned toward it until he heard a familiar voice call his name.

He turned to see someone he hadn't expected walking toward him in long black dress with a burgundy jacket, her bushy blonde hair fixed in a simple, yet attractive, style.

"Hermione?"

"In your letter last night you mentioned you'd be here today, and it was listed in the paper. I had to come. I hope you don't mind." She spoke quickly as she approached her best friend, who was failing miserably at holding back his tears. Without thinking about it, she flung her arms around him and allowed him to cry on her shoulder.

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Ginny walked into the foyer to see something she never expected. Her boyfriend was crying on the shoulder of Hermione Granger. She knew they were close friends, but Ginny thought he was crying on the wrong shoulder. Wasn't that why she'd come with her boyfriend – to help him grieve? What was Hermione even doing here, anyway?

Surprisingly, she didn't really feel that upset or jealous about it, only a bit annoyed that her boyfriend was hugging another woman in front of everybody. Part of her wondered if Harry secretly had romantic feelings for Hermione. She was pretty sure Ron did. She wondered if one day Harry would drop her for Hermione, and further wondered if she'd even care.

It's not that Harry wasn't a good boyfriend to her. He was always polite and considerate. She loved the pigmy puff he'd bought her from the twins' shop, as well as the roses. He was also very good at snogging, as he'd proven yet again the night before. Not to mention how cute he was. It's just that sometimes, like now, she'd think of him more like a brother than a boyfriend.

Sure, she'd had that embarrassing crush, that seemed to double after the Chamber business, but she thought she'd completely gotten over him. She'd dated Michael, who turned out to be a git, and then Dean.

She frowned at the thought of Dean Thomas and his reply after she'd dumped him. He was very understanding. He'd said that he was sorry she felt that way, and that whoever that other guy was, he was a very lucky bloke and would have to be an idiot to reject her. She found herself wondering what a relationship with him would have been like. She walked up to her mother and chatted with her while they waited for Harry.

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Hermione had never seen her best friend break down like this, and had a feeling that it wasn't just about his uncle. In the space of a little more than a month, Harry had lost both of the father figures he'd known. She didn't believe he'd grieved properly for Sirius. Before he'd started dating Ginny, he'd needed someone to talk to. Once he started dating her, he all but forgot about his godfather.

She found that she was very comfortable having Harry's arms around her, although she wished the circumstances were different. She patted his back and encouraged him to, "Let it out," for as long as it took. After a while he finished crying, and looked into her eyes.

He blinked and suddenly looked uneasy. "Er, thanks. I'm, er, sorry I, er, wet your jacket."

She smiled at him. He was so cute when he was nervous. "That's what friends are for."

"I'll, er, just clean up in the loo. Be back in a minute."

Five minutes later, he emerged with a clean face, and Hermione allowed herself to take in his appearance. Even with red eyes, she still thought he was exceptionally handsome, especially in that suit. She had to force herself not to whistle at him. "Nice suit."

"Thanks."

"He bought it yesterday," said Ginny, who walked up and took Harry's hand. Hermione forced herself not to frown.

"Hello, Ginny."

"Hi." Ginny looked around. "I don't see your parents. Did you take the Knight Bus?"

Grinning, Hermione pulled something out of her purse. "Actually, I took the test and got a driver's license, and my parents got me a car. I drove here." She proudly showed them her new license.

"Wow! That's great!" said Harry.

"Wizards and witches don't have to test for that. Harry got his without taking a test," said Ginny.

"I know," said Hermione, "But I think it's important to actually earn a license." She turned to Harry. "No offense, Harry. I know you were taught how to drive after you had the license."

"Truthfully, Hermione. I agree with you, but wasn't about to turn down the license when Dumbledore gave it to me." He took on a grim expression. "It's the least he can do after..."

"We should probably talk about this somewhere else. Would you like to come to my house?"

Harry's face formed a big smile immediately. "I'd love to. I was near your house yesterday when I was running my errands and thought about visiting you."

"*WE'LL* have to check with our Order guard before *WE* agree to anything," said Ginny stiffly, causing Harry to frown for a moment.

"Then we'll ask them now," said Harry as he, accompanied by the two girls, walked toward the adults.

"Hello, Hermione," said Mrs. Weasley. "I must admit we were surprised to see you here."

"I knew Harry would be coming here today, so I thought I'd come. Anyway, I've invited Harry and Ginny to come home with me for a visit. I brought my own car and would like to show it to them."

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea," said Molly.

"Actually," said Moony, "I think that it's a great idea. You know Harry will go off on his own anyway. At least this way you'll know where he is."

"But I..."

"If you're worried about their safety, I'll accompany them." He turned to the teenagers. "If that's alright with you."

"That's fine, Professor Lupin," said Hermione.

"How will you be getting back?" asked Molly.

"The Knight Bus," answered Remus.

"Alright then. Be back before dark."

A few minutes later, the group was packed into a blue green Pontiac Grand Am. Hermione was in the driver's seat, Remus was next to her. In the back seat, Harry was sitting next to Ginny.

"I thought we'd stop and get lunch before we go to my house. Do any of you have a preference?"

"What about Chinese food?" suggested Ginny.

"Harry hates Chinese," said Hermione. The boy in question nodded, causing Ginny to frown. "How about Italian?"

"Sounds great!" said Harry and Moony at the same time. Ginny decided to agree as well, so they went to an Italian restaurant for an enjoyable lunch that Harry insisted on paying for when the bill came.

They finally made it to the Granger residence, a very nice-looking three-story house. Hermione parked in the three-car garage. Her parents were at work.

"Wow!" said Ginny as she looked around, "You never told us you were rich."

Blushing slightly, Hermione replied, "Only people like Malfoy brag about their family's money. Anyway, we're not that rich."

"Compared to my family, you are."

Lupin said, "Let's just say that the Grangers are well off, and leave it at that."

"So, Hermione, are you going to give us a tour," asked Harry.

After she'd given them a tour of the garden and the house, showing them the five bedrooms, and den, she showed them a small library, where she spent the largest amount of time.

"You don't have to show us every book in your library," said Harry playfully.

"Ha, ha," she replied. "Why don't you sit down in the living room and I'll get you some tea?"

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A few minutes later, they were each sipping their drinks in the living room. Harry and Remus were each sitting in a recliner, while Ginny and Hermione were on the couch. Hermione wasn't sure whether or not Harry would want to discuss Dumbledore's manipulations with the others. She also wanted to share her discoveries about wards. She decided to let Harry have control by stating, "That was some letter you sent me last night." That allowed him to comment on whatever aspect he wanted to, whether it was about his relatives, his assets, or Dumbledore's manipulations, since no one else knew what he'd written.

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Looking around, Harry's eyes focused on Lupin. Although he knew about Lupin's history, and got along well with him, he didn't know if his loyalties would lie with him or with Dumbledore. Deciding to see if he'd defend the headmaster, Harry said, "Yes. As I wrote, I was amazed at the friendliest conversation I ever had with my relatives. It didn't take much convincing to get Aunt Petunia to move. She realized that Dumbledore wasn't protecting that house at all, and the best thing to do was disappear."

Lupin looked startled. "What do you mean, he wasn't protecting the house at all? I know it was attacked, but..."

"You heard it yourself at the meeting. He had Dung on guard duty again! He knew those blood wards could be penetrated easily from the time Riddle got my blood!"

"Actually," said Hermione, "I've been researching wards extensively, and haven't found any mention of wards based off of a mother's blood or being welcome in a home. I bought a few books on rare wards and blood magic yesterday morning and read them. There also wasn't any kind of ward that couldn't be detected by someone because they weren't powerful enough. Most wards can't be detected unless you're looking for barriers or trying to break in. A senior auror like Mr. Shacklebolt wouldn't have had any trouble detecting that something was there, even if he couldn't identify or penetrate it."

"Really?" asked Remus, "May I see those books?"

"Of course."

While Hermione was getting the books, Lupin continued. "I'll admit that I've never heard of those kinds of wards either, but Professor Dumbledore was so insistent that they would protect Harry. If there really weren't special wards there, then I can't imagine why he'd insist that you lived someplace you obviously weren't happy."

"I don't know, but I do know that I had another vision a few nights ago."

"What?" asked Hermione as she came back into the room. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wasn't sure if you'd believe the vision or not, after..."

"It's still important to share it. He's either trying to trick you again or you've had a true vision. If we discuss it, we may be able to come to a conclusion."

Harry took a deep breath and told of his dream, where Voldemort said there were only standard wards on the property and how he'd tell Snape to kill Harry in an occlumency lesson. "And the next day, Dumbledore told me Snape wanted to resume my private lessons. I refused."

"Wow," said Lupin. "So, according to your vision, Severus never was trying to teach you to shield your mind."

"There are two possibilities," said Hermione. "Voldemort is trying to sway your faith in Professor's Dumbledore and Snape or..."

"Dumbledore is simply wrong to trust Snape!" yelled Harry louder than he'd intended, causing everyone to flinch. "Sorry."

Ginny said, "The fact that he decided to teach you occlumency the next day makes it sound real."

"As does the research I've done on wards," said Hermione softly.

"But Dumbledore has always been trustworthy," said Lupin.

"He lied to both of us just a few days ago!" snapped Harry. "I went to Gringotts yesterday and found out that Sirius did leave me his house!"

"WHAT!" shouted a red-faced Moony, "That bloody liar! He looked us both in the eyes and said Sirius left it to him! He told us..."

"He said he was afraid I wouldn't let Snape in the house anymore, or let him have his meetings there. That reminds me, I bought a book on magically claiming ownership of homes yesterday, but unlike Hermione, I haven't had time to read it yet."

"It would serve Dumbledore right if the Order can't use the house after what he tried to pull!" said an uncharacteristically angry Remus, "Trying to swindle you out of your inheritance! Letting Snape run the meeting!"

"You noticed that, too, did you?" asked Harry, and then something occurred to him. "That dumb-old-dork let Snape kick me out of my own bloody house!" The cup of tea in his hand broke at that moment, and Harry would never know if it was accidental magic or if he just had a very firm grip.

After about an hour of berating Dumbledore, but not mentioning Harry's enormous fortune, the three visitors left Hermione's house, and as previously planned, took the Knight Bus back to the Burrow to find Ginny's dad waiting for them with some nice cold lemonade.

Hermione would be arriving in just a few days for Ginny's birthday party, and would be spending the rest of the summer there.

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## **Chapter 7 – Here Comes Hermione**

“Happy birthday, Ginny!” said Harry when his girlfriend appeared in the kitchen where Harry was standing at the stove scrambling eggs. He’d asked Mrs. Weasley if she’d let him cook Ginny’s birthday breakfast since he’d given her birthday gift the day before Uncle Vernon’s funeral and didn’t have anything to present her with at the party. He had sausages and pancakes in other pans on the stove cooking. He and Ginny had been getting along well since he’d been staying at the Burrow instead of going out for whole days at a time. He and Ginny had gone on a few bike rides, but only to the nearby town.

She walked up and gave him a kiss on the cheek (she didn’t want to make him burn breakfast by snogging him). “Thank you. I didn’t know you could cook.”

“That’s one thing the Dursleys made sure I knew how to do,” he said with a blank expression as Ginny sat down. “I wanted to make your birthday breakfast.”

“That’s so sweet! I’m surprised Mum let you near the stove, though.”

“It was...” said Harry, but he was interrupted.

“Good morning, Harry. And to you, Birthday Girl!” Arthur said jovially as he made his way into the kitchen. “Let me get you two a glass of pumpkin juice.”

“Thanks, daddy.”

Mr. Weasley got the beverage out and poured three glasses, putting a few drops of a clear potion in two of them and performing cooling charms on all the cups. “Here you go, Ginny.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek and gave Harry his cup.

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Ron showed up at the exact moment that Harry began serving breakfast, and Molly came in from the living room, where she’d been reading Witch Weekly since Harry was making breakfast. They all

complimented Harry's cooking, saying it was only second to Molly's. When they were done, Ginny dragged Harry to the broom shed for some 'quality time' before anybody noticed they'd left.

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At the same time, Hermione was packing the last of her things into her trunk. She would be going to Ginny's party this afternoon, and staying at the Burrow for the rest of the summer. Before packing it away, she reread the letter Harry had written her the day before.

"*Hi Hermione!*

*I just wanted to say how happy I am that you'll be coming here tomorrow. We're all looking forward to seeing you again. Ginny is so excited about her birthday party, she's positively glowing! She has such a nice smile.*

*I want to thank you for coming to the wake and letting me cry on your shoulder. That really helped me. You are a true friend and you mean a lot to me.*

*I'd suggest bringing your car here so that the four of us (me, Ginny, you, and Ron) can drive around together without taking the Knight Bus. My bike only fits two people. Maybe you could get Mr. Weasley to charm your car to shrink so you could bring it with to Hogwarts. If not, you could have your parents meet us at Kings Cross station and have one of them drive it to your house. I definitely don't think you should leave it at the Burrow all year with Mr. Weasley. He'll probably take it apart and who knows if he'll be able to put it back together.*

*I just finished reading about magically claiming houses, and think I know what to do, but I wanted you to look at the book before I try to claim Grimmauld Place to make sure I don't mess up. You're so smart. I know you'll be able to help.*

*I also want your opinion on something. On the day I moved my relatives to their new house, I got Dobby to help me. Don't worry – I paid him five Galleons despite his protests. He told me that Winky is still drinking, and that she'll be depressed until she gets a new master.*

*Now that I know I have a lot of property, it occurred to me that I may need help with it and could use the services that house elves provide.*

*I'm considering trying to hire both Dobby and Winky. I'd try to get them to agree to being paid. I'm sure Dobby would agree, but I'm not sure about Winky – she may demand that I don't pay her. I would be as kind and considerate of them as possible, and would NEVER punish them like the Malfoys did to Dobby. I know how strongly you feel about house elf enslavement and would never hire them without talking to you first. I highly value your opinion. I feel that this would make them both very happy, and for now, isn't that the most important thing?*

*Maybe one day, you'll be able to reach your goals with S.P.E.W. and house elves will be happy and free, but right now freedom is turning Winky into a depressed alcoholic. I think she'd be better off happy and enslaved than miserable and free.*

*Our O.W.L. results came in yesterday. I got an 'O' in Defense Against the Dark Arts, an 'E' in Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Herbology, Potions, and Transfiguration (I know I owe that to you because of your encouraging us to study), and an 'A' in Astronomy. I got a 'P' in Divination and a 'D' in History of Magic. Ron got about the same except he got an 'E' in Defense. I'm confident that you did much better than both of us. I guess I won't be an auror. I really wouldn't want to be in class with Snape another two years anyway – especially after my dream. The less contact I have with him, the better! With the money I have, I don't even need a career, but I'm sure I'll find something to do after I'm done with school. I'm not that worried about my career right now. I just want to survive this war.*

*Once you're here, there's something important that I want to discuss with you, Ron, and Ginny that can't be put in a letter. That's all I can say about it for now.*

*Don't tell anybody this, but McGonagall sent me the badge for Quidditch Captain. After thinking about it, I don't want the responsibility. I have more important things to worry about than a game. I think my training with Dumbledore will take up a lot of time, not to mention any extra training I do on my own. If practice is*

*interfering with that, I may even decide not to play at all. I sent the badge back, telling Professor McGonagall that, suggesting that she give the badge to Ginny.*

*I know what you're thinking – that it's only because she's my girlfriend, but that's not the reason. I'd never want to set her up to fail. I know she could do it! It was between her and Ron, but the truth is that Ron barely has enough confidence to play, to say nothing about being in charge. Ginny would have no trouble yelling at someone who's not doing their job while Ron would be stuttering. Ron only did well for one game out of three last year, while Ginny caught the Snitch in two games out of two. That makes her a better player, or at least more reliable. Ginny will be at Hogwarts for a full three years, which would provide some stability in the captain position like we had when Oliver was captain for his fifth, sixth, and seventh year. Both Ron and I will only be there for two years (if I stay on the team).*

*See you tomorrow!*

*Harry'*

She glared at the logic in Harry's argument about Winky. She couldn't find a rational reason to make Winky suffer when a solution easily presented itself. She was touched that he valued her opinion enough to ask before he did it, because he could always enslave the elf and say it was none of her business. She also wondered what it was that Harry wanted to talk to her about.

Sighing, she put the letter in her trunk and closed it, and then struggled as she carried it to her car and put it in the boot. She got into the driver's seat of her vehicle and drove off.

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Ginny watched in fascination as Harry pumped fuel into his motorcycle. He'd taken her to lunch in town and needed to stop off on the way home. She'd heard from her father that muggle vehicles required petrol, but her Muggle Studies teacher said they used horses and buggies. She'd asked the teacher about cars like the one her dad had lost, and he said there were horses inside the front of some buggies that wore special bridals called 'engines,' and that the

owners would put straw in there for the horses to eat every day. She wondered what else her muggle studies class was wrong about. She decided to ask Harry once he paid for the fuel.

“Harry?”

“Yeah, Ginny.”

“My Muggle Studies professor said that muggles use horses and buggies instead of cars and motorcycles, and never talked about getting fuel.”

Harry smiled but stopped himself from laughing. “Hermione said that the class was a hundred years out of date.”

“Why didn’t she tell me that when I signed up for it?”

“Maybe she didn’t think of it,” he answered, shrugging his shoulders.

“No. She knew I was taking it. She asked me what classes I signed up for when she was staying with us before the Quidditch World Cup.”

He grinned. “How did she react when you told her you were taking it?”

“She said that she’d dropped out of it, but not why. She really didn’t comment much on it, except that she much preferred Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.”

“Maybe she just didn’t want to badmouth the class.”

“But she told you!”

“I don’t know. I do know that we need to put on our helmets and get back to the Burrow.”

They did just that, and soon were on the road toward the Burrow. She was sitting there with her arms around Harry’s waist. When they’d left for lunch, she’d felt excited to be in that position, but now it didn’t seem very exciting. She supposed she was getting used to having

her arms around Harry's waist and was no longer getting the 'goose bumps.'

She was broken out of her musing by a sound she'd never heard before and nearly jumped out of her skin as she held Harry tightly, knowing that he could save her from whatever monster had roared like that. She turned her head around to see Hermione's car behind them, with her waving at them. She nodded at the brunette, not about to let go of Harry. Suddenly the car roared at her again. The sound reminded her of a horn. It had been quiet when she'd ridden in the car before. She wondered if the sound meant the car was hungry and needed petrol or that it was angry at either them or Hermione.

-

Harry had heard the beeping and looked in the side mirrors to see Hermione driving behind him. He smiled but didn't know what to do to acknowledge that he'd seen her. He wasn't comfortable enough driving the bike to try waving his hand at her, especially with a passenger, and he couldn't talk with his helmet on. He simply kept driving to the Burrow.

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Hermione was surprised, though pleased, when she saw Harry and Ginny on the road in front of her. She recognized the matching dragon leather jackets and the red hair sticking out of Ginny's helmet. Ginny had nodded at her, and she continued to follow them to the Burrow. She figured that Harry must have taken Ginny to lunch for her birthday. They soon pulled into the Weasley property and she parked just behind Harry, who promptly took off his helmet, jacket, and gloves, and put them (along with Ginny's) into a storage compartment of the bike before shrinking it down and walking up to her. She had just exited her car when Harry pulled her into a tight hug.

"It's great to see you, Hermione!" he exclaimed as he released her.

"It's great to see you, too, Harry." She then looked at the youngest Weasley. "Happy birthday, Ginny!"

"Thanks," she said with a smile as she walked up to her friend.

Hermione pulled her into a tight hug. “So what time is your surprise party?”

Harry chuckled at Hermione’s little joke. She knew full-well that it wasn’t a surprise party, and that if it were one, Ginny would be the wrong person too ask about it.

Sighing, Harry thought this might be the best time to talk about the prophecy. It was a few hours before other people would arrive for the party, and he really wanted to get it off his chest. “Let’s see if we can find Ron. I’d like to talk to all three of you.”

They found Ron flying around outside, and Harry called him down. “Oi! I need to talk to you about something.”

“Fine, but this better be good!” Ron called out as he landed. “I was practicing a new Keeper move.”

“It is important,” said Harry. “Come on.” Once they’d closed themselves into Ron’s room, Harry began. “It’s about why we were at the Department of Mysteries.”

“You mean the prophecy that the Death Eaters were after?” asked Hermione.

“Exactly.”

“The Daily Prophet’s been calling you the ‘Chosen One,’ lately,” commented Ginny.

Taking a deep breath, Harry responded. “For the first time in history, the Daily Prophet is spot on. I guess you can’t be wrong all the time. About six months before I was born, Dumbledore was interviewing Trelawney for the Divination teacher position. He was about to politely decline her offer to teach since he thought her to be a fraud when she went into a trance just like the one she had the night Wormtail escaped. She said,

*"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."*

"A Death Eater heard the beginning before he was caught spying. He reported it to his master who proved his bravery by going after babies. Both myself and Neville could have qualified, but Voldemort chose to mark me with my scar. Anyway, that's why Dumbledore hired Trelawney and why he's taken such a personal interest in me."

The others stared at him for about ten seconds without saying a word. Finally Hermione broke the silence. "Do, do you think it's a true prophecy?"

He half-smiled at this. "That is a good question. I know that both Voldemort and Dumbledore believe it, and part of it seems to have come true. I know that she was right when she predicted Tom's rebirth. The point is that Riddle is going to keep coming after me until either he kills me or I kill him, which means that he's going to make it come true eventually."

"Do you have any idea what this power is?" asked Ron.

"Dumbledore says it's love," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders, "although I don't see how."

"Maybe you can snog him to death," joked Ginny.

"Or give him an STD," muttered Hermione with a smirk.

"A what?" asked Ron while Harry was glaring at her.

"Never mind," she said, holding back her laughter at Harry's expression. "Bad joke. The only way I can imagine love as a weapon is if you have to sacrifice..." Her voice trailed off.

"So let's hope the lying thief is wrong," said Harry. He and Ginny had told Ron about how Dumbledore lied about Grimmauld Place and the wards around Privet Drive so he understood that remark. "I'd prefer the power to be a bomb on Tom's house."

"It certainly is conceivable that muggle weaponry, which Voldemort has rejected along with everything else non-magical, could be the power he knows not," said Hermione. "He probably has no idea about any technological advances for the past fifty years."

"Just like love, that's something Tom knows a little about but doesn't think is of any value," commented Ginny, "so it's just as likely."

"It could also be a spell that he actually doesn't know about," said Ron.

"That actually would be a *power he knows not*," said Harry.

"The point is that Harry needs to start training," said Hermione, "and we should train with him."

"Dumbledore wants me to start training with him once school starts," said Harry. "I don't know if he'll want you to join it or not."

"Why hasn't Dumbledore been training you since you could walk?" asked Ginny.

Harry let out a snort. "He said he wanted me to *enjoy* my childhood."

"With the Dursleys?" asked Ginny and Hermione together.

"Yeah. What a laugh! He knew I hated every moment of my life with them!"

Hermione looked deep in thought for a moment. "If he's convinced himself that love is your weapon, then he probably didn't see any reason to train you."

"*I* can train him in *that*," said Ginny seductively.

Harry sighed. "Hopefully I'll be able to get some real training, because up until now I've trained myself for the most part - for the tournament and then the D.A. – with Hermione's help of course. The point is that I wouldn't know how to stupefy someone if I'd counted on Hogwarts to train me."

"Maybe he wanted you to train yourself," suggested Hermione.

"Why? Because he was too lazy to do the job? He must know a million hexes even you've never heard of and could have been teaching them to me all this time!"

"Discussing what should have been done is pointless," said Hermione. "At least now you'll be trained. I do have other ideas for training beside spells. I think we should exercise."

"WHAT?" asked Ron.

"It'll build endurance in a duel so that the Death Eater will tire more quickly than us," said Harry, agreeing.

"And allow us to move quicker," added Ginny.

"Over the next few weeks I'll make up a schedule that we can follow at Hogwarts. We can use the Room of Requirement for whatever we need. I'll bet it can even provide muggle exercise equipment." She began to get excited. "I need to get a quill and parchment!" She got up and left the room in a hurry.

"I guess our, er, meeting's over," said Harry.

"Yeah," said Ginny. "Ron, you can go back to your broomstick. I want to *talk* with Harry for a little while before the party."

Before Ron could respond, a handsome tawny owl flew through the open window and straight to Ginny.

"That looks like a Hogwarts owl," said Ron as his sister opened the envelope.

She pulled out a letter as a patch fell to the floor. Harry hid his smile as he watched her stare at the piece of parchment in disbelief.

"Is that a prefect badge?" asked Ron. "Did McGonagall change her mind? Mum'll be thrilled."

"No," she said while picking it up and showing it to them. "It's the Quidditch Captain badge."

Ron's face turned pale while Harry said, "Congratulations!" and hugged her.

"How did you get it? It should've been Harry," said Ron coldly. "I've been on the team longer than you!"

"McGonagall said she wanted it to be a fifth year who could keep the position for three years," she said nervously.

"Let me see that letter!" Ron said, reaching for it.

"No you don't!" she yelled as she pulled it out of her brother's reach.

"I don't know why you're not mad, Harry!" he said, turning to his best mate.

"I've got other things to worry about. Dumbledore probably told McGonagall that I was gonna be busy training and wouldn't be able to handle the extra pressure."

"I suppose. But why Ginny?" He grabbed at the letter again, this time surprising his sister and ripping it out of her hands.

"RON!" she shouted as she pulled out her wand.

He looked it over quickly, reading aloud. "...most reliable performance...not affected by negative feedback from the crowd like others...most..." At that moment, he dropped the parchment as bat bogeys came out of his nose and attacked his face, sending him running outside.

She closed the door and faced her boyfriend. “I can’t believe it!” she shouted and proceeded show him how excited she was.

-

Mrs. Weasley had been pleased, though surprised, that Ginny had been made captain, and promised to get her a new broom before school started. Despite Ron’s sulky mood, the party was a success. All the Gryffindors from Ginny’s year, along with a few Ravenclaws (including Luna) and Hufflepuffs, came along with Neville. Dean had been invited but opted not to come. Harry noticed that Ron seemed to be watching Luna rather closely, but then he denied it as his face began to match his hair. Ginny made it a point to show everyone the pigmy puff, who she named Arnold, that Harry had given her as a birthday present when it was time to open her gifts.

-

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny woke up early the next morning. Although Ron was still sulking, Harry had talked him into coming with them to headquarters so Harry could claim the house. Hermione had read the chapter of Harry’s book the previous evening and was carrying it.

Harry confidently walked up to the fireplace, grabbed a handful of floo powder, threw it down, and clearly said, “Black Manor,” the way he’d done it the day his uncle was killed. He felt himself moving uncomfortably through the floo network until he saw Grimmauld Place in front of him, but instead of falling forward, he felt himself pulled backward. He began panicking, not having a clue what was going on until he felt himself run into someone else. They were moving backwards together until they were both shot backwards out of a fireplace.

“Ouch!” shouted Ginny as Harry looked around at where he’d landed. He was lying on his back with his girlfriend beside him. He looked around and saw the concerned faces of both Ron and Hermione, which made him smile. At least he was back at the Burrow and not in Knockturn Alley.

“What happened?” asked Hermione as both victims got up.

As Harry was rubbing a bruised shoulder, he said, "I could see Headquarters for about ten seconds but couldn't leave the fireplace. Suddenly I was pulled back like I was being vacuumed. I didn't know what was going on. Then I ran into someone – apparently Ginny – and we both kept going backwards until we were thrown out just now."

"The floo wouldn't reject you unless...he wouldn't...would he?"

"Wouldn't what, Hermione?" asked Harry with anger in his eyes. "Did Dumbledore do something?"

Looking nervous, the brunette answered, "Well, er, it sounds like a password has been set on the floo, and I believe that he's the only one who could do that until you claim the house. You were supposed to say something while you were looking at Black Manor."

"That son of a..."

"Harry!" said Hermione.

"That's it! He can find someplace else for the Order! I'm driving there, now!"

"We can use my car," said Hermione. "It'll fit us all."

"If you still want to come," said Harry. "This may take awhile."

"I'll write a note to mum that we'll be gone," said Ginny.

"Oh, no you won't!" came Molly's voice from behind them. She'd obviously heard the noise of Harry and Ginny crashing.

Taking a deep breath, but with confidence, Harry turned to face the Weasley matriarch. "Dumbledore lied to both myself and Remus on the day my uncle died. He claimed that Sirius left Headquarters to him, but when I went asked Gringotts, they told me Sirius left it to me. When I confronted him about it, he admitted that he'd lied to make sure I wouldn't stop Snape from going there. I let him continue to use the house. Today I'm going to magically claim it so that I have control

of the wards and everything. I went to floo there, but was sent backwards. Hermione says he must have set a password.”

To say she was shocked would be an understatement. “He lied? I heard him, too. He didn’t tell me about a password. Maybe he has a good reason.”

“I don’t care what his reason, as the owner of the house, I should’ve been notified immediately. He’s gone too far, and I’m claiming the house today. I’m going over there and taking my house back from that thief! I don’t want to defy you, Mrs. Weasley, because I’m very fond of you, and appreciate your wonderful hospitality, but I need to do this. I believe I’ll need Hermione’s help. Ron and Ginny are welcome to come along.”

Molly looked indecisive for a few moments. “I’ve got to...can’t tell the Order or they might...I can’t go with you today, and Ron and Ginny have chores to do.” At the point the two youngest Weasleys looked upset. “Is there anyone from the Order that you trust to help you and not tell Professor Dumbledore?”

All the kids looked surprised at her reaction. “If it’s your house, he doesn’t have the right to use it without your permission, and I agree that he’s overstepped his bounds in this instance. I wouldn’t want him to take over the Burrow.”

“How about if you call Remus and have him meet us there?” said Harry. “I don’t think it’s likely we’ll be attacked on the road when no one knows we’re not here.”

She frowned, but finally gave in. “You haven’t been attacked when you’ve gone on short drives with Ginny, so I don’t suppose you’d be attacked on a long trip either. I don’t suppose I can control either of you, and at least today I’ll know where you are, unlike the days Harry has simply taken off. I wish I didn’t have to go shopping today. You both know how to defend yourselves – Harry especially. Just be careful and get back as quickly as possible. I’ll simply tell Arthur that you’re out running an errand so that he doesn’t accidentally tell someone at work.”

"Thanks, a lot, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, quickly hugging her to make sure she wouldn't change her mind. "I'll be right back. Hermione, you'll love the motorcycle!"

"But I thought..." she said as he ran upstairs and got the bike.

"I've ridden in your car. Please ride on my bike," he said with his puppy-dog eyes.

Sighing, she said, "Fine." Ginny didn't look too happy, but didn't say anything.

"Bye Gin," Harry said, giving her a quick peck on the mouth. "I'm sorry you can't come, too." He then whispered, "Maybe you can talk to Ron about the Quidditch team." He turned to his best mate. "See you later, Ron."

-

Five minutes later, Harry and Hermione were dressed in the helmets, jackets, and gloves, and Harry was sitting on the bike while she was eying it apprehensively. With his mouth covered by the helmet, Harry couldn't talk. He moved his right arm to signal her to get on the motorcycle. Finally, she gave in and put her arms around him. He turned on the bike and drove off.

Harry smiled to himself as he felt how tightly her arms were wrapped around him. He thought they felt even better than Ginny's, but then shook his head slightly, trying to get those thoughts out of his mind.

-

Hermione closed her eyes contentedly as she held herself closely to Harry. She wondered how she could have hesitated to have an excuse to put her arms around him. She wasn't even worried about the speed he was going or anything else, because she felt completely safe when she was this close to Harry. The only other time she'd felt like that had been on the back of a hippogriff.

She contemplated these feelings of security that were only associated with Harry and came to a frightening conclusion – she

was starting to fancy her best friend. She blinked her eyes to make that thought go away. *'I can't fancy Harry because he's dating Ginny, and seems quite content with her! Besides, she's prettier and more fun. She plays Quidditch while I read books. Of course he likes her better!' she thought to herself. 'If I want a boyfriend, I should look for a Ravenclaw who studies like I do. But he won't be brave and noble and...Stop it! I CAN'T fancy Harry and that's final!'*

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They finally made it to London, and Harry pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving," he said after pulling off his helmet.

"Do you think it's safe to just leave it out here?" she asked when he didn't shrink it.

"Muggles do that all the time. Besides, Sirius put some antitheft charms on it. The first one simply makes someone not want to steal the bike. That should work on any potential thief." He smiled broadly. "I pity any thief that charm doesn't work on."

"Why? What does it do to them?"

He chuckled as he put on his disguise cap. "Trust me. You don't want to know."

They walked into the restaurant and were soon seated. After they'd ordered their breakfasts, Harry said, "You don't happen to know exactly, er, where Grimmauld Place is, do you?"

She stared at him for about ten seconds before she burst out laughing. "You don't know where we're going?"

"Not so loud," he said, glancing around. "I know about where it is, but..."

"Don't worry. I know where it is. I'll give you the directions before we leave."

He looked into her eyes and smiled. "Thanks. I know that I can always count on you."

-

An hour later, they found themselves on the street where Black Manor was located. Harry pulled into an alley where they dismounted, took off their helmets, and shrunk the bike. Harry put it in his jacket. He was wearing his disguise cap and Hermione was carrying the book on claiming houses. They soon saw a man sitting on the porch at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Harry walked up to him and shook his hand.

"Remus! I'm surprised you're out here. Why aren't you in the house?"

He looked angry. "I can't get in. I couldn't floo in. I couldn't apparate in. The door won't open. I don't know what Dumbledore's playing at, but you can solve the problem. You can claim the house from out here, right?"

"Yes," said Hermione, "and no one should see or hear us on the porch either." She opened the book where she'd left a bookmark. "Harry, put your hand on the doorknob."

She directed him through a fifteen minute process that began with him saying, "I, Harry James Potter, claim this house as the legal heir to Sirius Orion Black, the previous owner of this house."

He continued claiming control of each protection in the house, including the door (getting it to open to people he named), the fireplace (naming a new password – 'mischief managed'), the apparition wards (allowing only those he named to apparate inside), and the Fidelius charm (changing the Secret-Keeper to Hermione – he found out that the owner can change the Secret-Keeper any time they want to – something Dumbledore would have to know, which should have given him reason to at least talk to Sirius after he was arrested). They were surprised, though pleased that no one was in the house when they entered.

He'd thought about making Remus Secret-Keeper, but felt that it could become a problem if someone needed access to his house

during the full moon, besides, Hermione was Harry's best friend and he trusted her more than anyone else. When he told her so (while Remus was in another room), she hugged him tightly and said, "Thank you, Harry. That means a lot to me."

At that moment, he looked deep into her eyes. "You mean a lot to me." He leaned his face toward hers.

-

She watched Harry's eyes get slightly darker as his face moved closer to hers. She found herself licking her lips in anticipation as her face moved a bit forward. She was beginning to close her eyes when their lips were millimeters apart. Suddenly she remembered that he was dating Ginny. She turned her head, causing him to kiss her cheek.

"This is wrong," she said, "You're dating Ginny."

He closed his eyes and shook his head in disgust at himself. "I, I'm sorry. I don't know what..." He sighed. "Sometimes I'm so happy with Ginny and sometimes...I'm sorry. Can we pretend I didn't just act like the world's biggest prat? I'm really sorry. I don't know if it's that we're alone together and you look so beautiful or..."

"Thank you."

He looked at her in confusion. "For what?"

Blushing, she replied, "You said I looked beautiful."

"It's the truth," he said shyly, "but it doesn't excuse my behavior. I shouldn't have tried to kiss you while dating Ginny. You should've slapped me in the face." He sighed again and mumbled, "Maybe if Ginny and I br..."

"Break up?" she asked with her eyes wide. "But you seem so happy with her."

"I usually am. I don't know what's wrong with me today. This usually does happen when I'm away from the Burrow."

“What usually happens?”

“I get doubts about Ginny. It’s probably nothing. Can we talk about something else?”

“Alright, Harry. I read what you said about Dobby and Winky.”

He looked at her expectantly. When she didn’t speak, he said, “and?”

“I can’t fault your logic. I wish I could, but I can’t. It’s alright with me if you hire them, even if you have to enslave Winky. I know you won’t mistreat them.”

“Thanks,” he said, taking her hand and squeezing it for a moment before letting go quickly and looking at the carpet.

Before he could say anything, Remus came back into the room carrying a box. “Harry, I found some photos of Sirius. A lot of them include your father; some even your mother. I thought you might want to look through them later, so I put them in an album. It’s in this box, along with a few other things from Sirius I thought you’d like.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks. I’m gonna hire a few house elves, now. Dobby! Winky!”

Both elves appeared, although Winky looked completely drunk. “Harry Potter has called Dobby and Winky, and we has come!” His ears drooped down. “Dobby is sorry for Winky’s state.”

“Whatz wong wiz Winky’s state? Azides fwums she’s disgwazed.”

“What is Harry Potter needing? Dobby is still delivering mail to your Petunia.”

“That’s good Dobby. I would like to hire the both of you, if you’d like to work for me.”

Dobby’s eyes immediately began watering as he hugged Harry’s legs. “Harry Potter asks if Dobby would like to work for him! Dobby is happy to be working for Harry Potter! Dobby isn’t needing any pay from the great Har...”

"You will be getting the same pay you got from Dumbledore, including the days off." He turned to the other elf and squatted down to her height. "Winky, would you like to work for me?"

"You, you iz wanting to hire Winky?" The prospect of a new master seemed to be helping her sober up.

"Very much. I know that you're a good elf. Do you want pay?"

"No! Winky isn't wanting pay! Winky is wanting to be enslaved!"

"Then that's how it will be." He looked at both of them. "How do I hire you guys?"

After they'd guided him through the spell, he said, "I'd like you to completely redecorate this place, and if Kreacher tries to stop you..."

"Pardon me, Master Harry Potter," said Winky, "but the traitor Kreacher is dead. He betrayed his master, causing his death, so the house elves gave him justice!"

"His head is with his ancestors," Dobby added.

Harry decided not to comment on elf justice, and surprisingly, neither did Hermione. "That's one of the many things I want changed here." Harry started listing the things he wanted changed.

When he mentioned Mrs. Black's portrait, Dobby immediately removed it. "It was being held up by the house elf sticking charm. Wizards isn't able to remove it."

"Does that mean Kreacher stuck her there?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, Miss Grangey," said Dobby.

-

Once he'd finished instructing the elves, Harry and Hermione bid them, along with Remus, farewell and left, putting the box from Moony in the storage compartment of the bike once it was resized. They then took off toward the Burrow.

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When the noise of the motorcycle reached the Burrow, Ginny was sitting inside reading one of her schoolbooks. Her dad, who'd come home for lunch (which was quite unusual) walked up to her carrying two cups of tea.

"Honey, would you bring those out for Harry and Hermione. Remember to give Harry the blue cup. I don't think he'd like getting the pink one."

"Okay, dad," she said, carefully marking her place and closing the book. She walked out the door toward them with a cheerful smile on her face. They'd just removed their helmets and Harry was shrinking the bike. "Hi, Harry! How was your morning?" She threw her arms around him and kissed him.

He broke it up as fast as he could without being rude. "The morning went fine. Now Dumbledore won't be able to get in the house," he said, sounding almost bored.

"That's good. Here's some tea. I'm sure you're thirsty."

She handed Harry the blue cup, and gave Hermione the other.

"So," said Ginny in a seductive voice, "what did you want to do for the rest of the day?"

"Oh, I thought I'd go flying with Ron," he said nonchalantly, causing Ginny to frown while Hermione stopped herself from giggling. She thought that maybe she would eventually have a chance to date Harry if things kept going that way.

While Harry was drinking his tea, Ginny continued, "Are you sure you don't want to spend some time with me?" She winked at him.

As Hermione watched, Harry's countenance changed a moment after he swallowed the tea. With a broad smile and an excited demeanor, Harry pulled Ginny to him for a long kiss, saying, "I think I would like to be alone with you," and pulled her by the hand without even glancing back at Hermione.



## Chapter 8 – Who’s the Culprit

Hermione Granger was the brightest witch of her age for a reason. She studied hard for her classes and paid attention to her surroundings, and she knew what she had seen happen. People's demeanors don't change that fast without outside influence, and based off of Harry's change immediately following his drink of tea coupled with his confession from earlier, there was only one explanation that fit the facts. The only trouble was that she couldn't believe it.

That's why she found herself alone in the room she was sharing with that...girl. Hermione didn't want to believe that her best female friend had done what she suspected, and was now with Harry...the brunette winced at the thought of what those two were up to.

Hermione had a furious look on her face as she pulled out certain potion ingredients from her trunk and expertly mixed them into a glass. She wished she were of age and could just perform the spell, but this method would have to do. She carefully stirred it clockwise five times, and then counter-clockwise twice. The liquid was now light pink. She used an eye dropper to get some to add to Harry's tea. If she was wrong, the contents of the blue cup Harry had left behind when he went off with Ginny would turn red when she added a few drops to it. If she was correct, it would turn blue, and Hermione was going to study the cruciatus curse using the youngest Weasley as a test subject. '*No,*' she thought. '*Not nearly creative enough. Besides, that would put me in Azkaban. I'll have to restrict myself to legal methods of punishment.*'

With a slightly trembling hand, Hermione Jean Granger held the dropper in front of her eyes. Theoretically, the results of this test could destroy her closest friendships. She took a deep breath and poured a few drops into the cup of tea. The liquid began bubbling as the color raced around the spectrum until ten seconds later it settled on light blue.

"Oh, Ginny," muttered Harry as he kissed her neck. "You are so beautiful."

"Shut up and snog me more!" she answered as she moved his face so their lips were meeting again." She moaned into his mouth as she closed her eyes once more until a loud noise interrupted them.

Hermione slammed the door to the broom shed open to find her best friend being used by this...this. "GET YOUR HANDS OFF HARRY, YOU SLAG!!!!"

"What?" said Ginny, shocked that Hermione would say that about her.

"Hermione!" shouted Harry angrily as he stood up, walking toward her. "How can you say that about Ginny?"

"I thought you might like Harry, but I never expected you to resort to name-calling!" yelled Ginny as she walked up beside Harry and took his hand.

Hermione slapped Ginny across the face. "Get your filthy hands off him, NOW!"

Harry let go of Ginny and grabbed both of Hermione's wrists, holding her still but not hurting her and got in between the two girls so Ginny couldn't hit Hermione. "What has gotten into you Hermione?"

"It's more about what's gotten into you, Harry! That...that...scarlet woman gave you a love potion!"

"I DID NOT!"

"I just tested the bloody tea you gave him, you traitor!" She pulled against Harry's hands in an attempt to hit Ginny again.

"You liar!" Ginny shouted right next to Harry's ear as she tried to get past him. "You're just lucky I left my wand in my room!"

"A love potion?" questioned Harry with a pale expression on his face.

"That explains why your feelings change when you leave here and that wench isn't able to..."

"I DID NOT!!!! HARRY, HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT HUSSY?" Tears were actually starting to form in Ginny's eyes. "I'd never do that to you, I swear!" She sniffed. "I owe you my life. I..."

"I'd think you'd remember that while you're brewing your potions!"

"I didn't..."

"Does that mean you bought them?"

Harry had been silent during this argument as anger grew inside him about the idea that he'd been slipped a love potion. He turned to Ginny with a look of contempt, but spoke calmly. "If Hermione says my tea had a love potion in it, then my tea had a love potion in it. You gave it to me. I never thought you'd do something like that to me." He backed away from the now crying girl.

"I don't know what happened, but I swear I didn't! Daddy gave me the cups and told me to give you the blue one, but he would never! He can't have!"

"Now you're accusing your own father?" sneered Hermione. "Anything to keep Harry!"

"NO!" stated a no-longer-crying Ginny whose face was now red with anger. "Why would I want to keep Harry? He's boring! But I did not slip anybody a love potion! I certainly don't need to, unlike some 'plain but ambitious girls' I know!" She got around Harry who was apparently in shock and slapped Hermione, who punched Ginny in response.

"GIRLS!!!" shouted Harry as he forced his way between them again.

"There you three are," came Arthur Weasley's jovial voice from the open doorway. "I expected to just find Harry and Ginny in here," he added with a wink. He was carrying a tray with three cups on it.

"Er, hi Mr. Weasley," said Hermione timidly as the three teenagers tried to calm down.

"I hope your argument is settled," he said. "I heard yelling from ten feet away."

"Y-yes daddy."

"Good. Your mother sent me out here to give you some lemonade." He held the tray with his left hand as he took each cup and handed it to each of them in turn.

"Thanks, daddy."

"You're welcome. I'll be on my way now. Drink up." He turned around and walked off.

"Don't drink this!" hissed Hermione. "I want to test it."

"You really think my dad..."

"I don't know, Ginny, but I think we should test it," interrupted Harry.

"Fine, but I don't like it."

The three of them walked back to the house without taking a sip of their drinks and went into Ginny's room without a word.

"I'll test my drink first," declared Hermione as she got more potion in her dropper. "If it turns red, there's no love potion, but if it turns blue, there is."

She put a few drops in her lemonade, and ten seconds later it was red. "I told you Daddy wouldn't..."

"Now we'll test Harry's," Hermione interrupted as she glared at the redhead.

When it turned blue, Ginny's eyes widened. "What?"

"I guess he's in on it with you," said Hermione coldly.

"Let's test hers," said Harry.

All three of them were in shock as they stared at the light blue liquid in Ginny's cup for about two minutes.

"Ginny, I..."

"Hermione, I..."

"I guess you both owe each other an apology," said Harry with a grin that faded within seconds. "But why is he doing it? If neither of us...I guess...fancies each other."

"Daddy would never do that! There has to be some other explanation!"

"Then who? Someone else in your family spiked the drinks and gave them to your dad?"

"I don't know," admitted Ginny. "But I do know I'm thirsty. I guess I'll have to get my own drinks now. I guess I'll wash this out in the loo and get some water."

"I'll give you some of my lemonade," said Hermione.

"Thanks, but I don't want red lemonade."

"It should clear up in about a minute and be fine to drink. But yours and Harry's are a different story. Clean out your glasses and we'll split mine."

True to Hermione's word, by the time Harry and Ginny had washed out their cups, Hermione's looked like ordinary lemonade, so she poured some in each cup.

"So what do we do, now?" asked Harry.

"I suggest we pretend we don't know what's going on and keep our eyes open," said Hermione. "You two pretend you're still together."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other nervously. "Er, I don't know if we should or can. I..."

"I know how you feel," muttered Ginny shyly. "It's like we've been..."

“Used.”

“Violated! I can’t believe we were...”

“Snogging. I know. It’s like I was kissing my sister.”

“I know! It’s just...gross. I...”

Harry took a deep breath. “Can we try to put this behind us and forget about it? Neither one of us was at fault.”

“We can try, but when I look at you I...” She shuttered. “I’m sorry, Harry. I mean, I suppose you are attractive, and nice, and I used to have that crush – a long time ago – but I’m over it and you are definitely not my type anymore.”

“I don’t think you’re helping Harry’s self-esteem,” interjected Hermione.

“Yeah, well I never fancied you,” replied Harry, ignoring Hermione’s comment as he began to get angry.

“I was a stupid little girl when I...”

“Harry! Ginny! Stop it! You’re both angry but hurting each other won’t solve anything! It looks like both of you are victims. The question is who’s doing this and why.”

“Maybe Mr. Weasley thinks that if his daughter got together with the Boy-Who-Lived...”

“Dad would NEVER do that, Potter!”

“Oh, your mum then...”

At that moment, Ginny slapped Harry hard. “You’re just assuming that it has to be my family doing this!”

“Who else could it be? This is your house!” yelled Harry.

"Quiet!" hissed Hermione. "Before you two kill each other, we should actually get proof of who is feeding you both love potion. Then maybe we'll know what to do."

Harry looked at Hermione. "So what's your plan? We check every drink we get?"

"And watch them prepared. I think your dad's cloak would be quite useful."

-

The next morning, Molly was cooking breakfast when Arthur walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Dear."

"Good morning."

"I can see you've breakfast almost ready. I'll set the table and get everybody's drink."

"Thank you, Arthur."

Ginny was under an invisibility cloak with Harry and Hermione. She cringed when she realized what she'd have done under that cloak with Harry just the day before. They were standing very close together and bent over a bit so they could fit as they stayed perfectly still in a corner. They watched Arthur pouring the glasses of pumpkin juice. When she saw her own father add a few drops of something to one of the cups, her entire face turned Weasley red, and her temperament with it. She came out from under the cloak yelling.

"DADDY! HOW COULD YOU?" She walked straight up to the startled man and grabbed the dropper out of his hand, causing him to drop the glass in his other hand.

"What's going on here?" asked Mrs. Weasley as she turned off the stove, "and don't yell at your father."

"He was putting this in one of the drinks!" said Ginny.

"This was just a little joke from Fred and George. It would've changed Harry into a canary."

"We'll see about that!" Ginny was glaring at her father with more venom than ever before in her life. "Hermione?"

"Really, Arthur," said Molly, "You shouldn't be so childish. You're supposed to set a good..."

"It's love potion," declared Hermione, showing her test results.

Harry pulled his cloak off, revealing both occupants. The bushy-haired teenage girl walked up to Ginny and took the dropper.

"What?" asked Molly as her eyes bulged out. "Arthur, why were you giving..."

"This isn't the first dose he's given me," said Harry. "I should say, both me and Ginny."

"We discovered it yesterday," said Hermione, "which is why we were spying."

"Arthur?" the Weasley matriarch said as she put her hands on her hips and glared at her husband. "Why are you giving those kids love potions? Harry? Our own Ginny? How could you? Where did you even get them?"

"I," Arthur got a glazed look in his eyes. "I..." He put his hands on his head and shut his eyes tightly, indicating a headache. "I don't...remember." He fell to the floor.

Molly's mood changed immediately as she realized, "He's been bewitched! Probably the Imperius curse." She pulled out her wand and performed a spell before smiling softly. "He's alright. He only fainted from the strain of fighting it off, but from what he said, the memory of who did it or why may have been obliterated."

"Do you think this might one of Voldemort's schemes?" asked Harry.

With her head down, Ginny admitted softly, "He's used me before."

"I don't know," said Molly. "Enervate." Arthur got up and Molly led him back to bed, telling him to take the day off and promising to let Dumbledore know about what happened after she flooed his work.

Harry sighed. "I guess we won't find out what exactly happened anytime soon. We might as well serve up the breakfast Mrs. Weasley made."

Harry dished out the bacon and eggs and the girls put them on the table. Harry and Ginny ended up walking to the table to take their seats at the same moment. They both looked at each other, and the seats that were next to each other.

Hermione cleared her throat behind them. "How about if I sit between you two if things are a bit...uncomfortable."

Without a word, Harry and Ginny complied and sat down. An owl flew into the dining room through an open window. It landed in front of Hermione, who removed a copy of the Daily Prophet and gave the owl a coin. She unrolled it and dropped it on the table a few seconds later as she gasped.

"What happened?" asked Harry, picking up her newspaper.

*"Harry Potter's Home Destroyed – His Remaining Family Missing*

*By Anna Jesse*

*Less than two weeks ago, Harry Potter's boyhood home with his muggle relatives was attacked, and his uncle was killed. Mr. Potter and Ministry Aurors stopped those Death Eaters.*

*Yesterday, that same home was attacked again, but this time the house wasn't left standing. It was burned to the ground and the Dark Mark was over the house. A reliable source confirmed that Mr. Potter had left the house after the first attack to stay at an undisclosed safe house, but his remaining relatives – Mr. Potter's aunt and cousin – were left there. However, no one was found in the wreckage – dead or alive. It has been speculated that You-Know-Who has captured them..."*

"Well," said Harry, "I'm glad I got them out of there. Obviously Dumbledore didn't protect them."

At that moment, Dobby popped into the house and bowed low.

"Master...Dobby means, Harry Potter sir, I went to your family's house to get the mail for your Petuny when Dobby sees that the house is being..."

"We just found out Dobby, but thanks for coming to tell me."

At that moment, Ron walked into the room with a smile on his face. "I smell breakfast. He looked at the other teenagers. "Harry, why aren't you sitting next to Ginny? What's going on?"

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## Chapter 9 – Discussions

“I know you’re telling the truth, but I can hardly believe it,” said Ron after he’d been informed that both his sister and his best friend had been receiving love potions that his father had been forced to give them. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Molly were sitting at the table in the Burrow. Ron’s shock over what happened didn’t affect his appetite at all as he continued to stuff his face with what was left of breakfast.

“It’s true,” said Harry. “Without the potion in our systems, neither Ginny nor myself have romantic feelings for one another.”

“But why would anyone do that? What’s to be gained by you dating my sister?”

They sat silently for a few minutes until Harry spoke up. “I suppose maybe Voldemort could’ve wanted to be sure I was ‘in love’ with someone so he could kidnap her. Under the influence of a love potion I might be dumb enough to do anything to save her, even let him possess me or something.”

“How do we know that Voldemort’s involved?” asked Hermione.

“Whoever it was used the Imperius curse on my husband, so it couldn’t have been a light wizard, now could it? Anyway, Professor Dumbledore will be here any minute to try and help Arthur remember who put him under the curse.”

“Indeed, I shall do my best,” said Dumbledore wearily. He’d just walked into the room after flooing in. “I’m afraid I have other bad news. It seems that...”

“If this is about Privet Drive, the place you promised to protect, I already know,” Harry sneered, “It was in today’s Prophet.”

Taking a deep breath, the wizened old man said, “As I told you before, Voldemort found a way around the blood wards, so all I could put up were more conventional wards. Perhaps it was part of the same plot as the love potion. According to our sources, Voldemort hasn’t

boasted about killing your remaining relatives yet, so he may be holding them for interrogation.”

Although Harry knew that his aunt and cousin were safe, he wanted to find out what Dumbledore would do about their alleged capture. “You mean torture.”

“Alas, I fear that is what he has in mind.”

“Are you planning a rescue mission?” asked Harry while the others were silently observing.

The headmaster shook his head sadly. “I’m afraid we can’t afford the resources for a mission that is extremely likely to fail.”

“Then it’s a good thing I persuaded them to move out of that house a few days after the attack,” said Harry smugly. He wished he had a camera to capture the bewildered expression on Albus’ face.

“Really? Then they’re safe?” Harry nodded. “That’s...wonderful news. Where are they?”

Making sure not to look Dumbledore in the eyes for fear of his using Legilimency, the green-eyed Seeker answered, “I’m not telling anybody. That way nobody can betray them – intentionally or not.”

“That’s probably a good idea, Harry. I’d like to clear up another matter before I see Arthur. Last night, I attempted to visit headquarters to...clean up the place a bit in anticipation of a meeting I planned for tonight, but couldn’t get inside. Did you have something to do with that?”

“Yes I did. You went too far when you locked down my house, so I claimed it and changed all the security. Now you’ll have to find another headquarters because you can’t use it anymore.”

Albus’ eyes widened in surprise for about half a second. “Surely you must realize that I simply wanted to make sure that the house was secure. Perhaps I should’ve told you the passwords, but I didn’t see any need since you were here.”

"It's my house and I can go there any time I choose!"

Looking for help, Dumbledore turned to the Weasley matriarch. "Molly, surely you can persuade him to see reason?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that in this matter I'm in agreement with Harry. First you lied to him about owning the house, and then you locked him out of it. I would do the same thing if you tried to take over the Burrow like that."

The old man looked around at the other children, only to see stone-cold expressions. "Surely Harry, you realize that you won't even be able to use the house for most of the year while you're at Hogwarts. Why shouldn't you allow it to be used for a higher purpose?"

"Do you have a house, headmaster?" asked Hermione.

Albus pulled on his collar as though getting hot. "Er, a modest cottage near Hogsmeade. Why?"

"Why don't you hold your meetings there?" asked Ron.

"Because it would be too obvious. It would also implicate me if we were caught."

Harry stared in shock at Albus for about five seconds. "So you want to implicate me instead? No thanks!"

"I think I should check on Arthur," said Dumbledore, quickly getting up and walking toward the stairs.

"I'll go with you," said Molly. "I'll make sure he's awake after fighting off the Imperius curse that was put on him by some foul, evil..."

"Molly, you shouldn't drop to their level by using such harsh words," said Albus sagely as they proceeded up the staircase.

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"Do you think Mr. Weasley's okay up there?" asked Harry.

"He should be," said Hermione.

"Excuse me," said Ginny as she got up. "I've got a letter to write."

"A letter?" asked Ron.

"To Dean. I've got to explain what happened. I..."

"I thought you agreed with me about Dean being a..."

"That was the potion talking. I hope he doesn't have a new girlfriend yet," she said while hurrying up to her room.

"Don't expect to borrow Pig!" he called after her before turning to Harry. "You wanna play some Quidditch?"

"Some other time." Suddenly Harry started acting nervous. "I, er, want to talk to Hermione for a few minutes about something." He turned to the brunette in question.

"Er, alright. Why don't we go for a walk?" Harry nodded and they both got up.

"Then I'm gonna go flying. See you later."

A few minutes later, Harry and Hermione were walking side by side down a path in the nearby woods. Neither had spoken since they left the house. Each was glancing at the other at different intervals until they found a clearing.

"Well," said Harry with a shaky voice, "Here we are."

Hermione smiled at him. "Yes, here we are."

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Er, um, I think, er, with knowing that a love potion was making me like Ginny, er, we, well, may want to continue the discussion we had at Grimmauld Place."

With her cheeks a bit pink, Hermione decided to play dumb. "What discussion is that, Harry?"

Now he was blushing. “W-Where I said y-you mean a lot to me and we almost k-kissed, and, er, I, er, said you’re b-beautiful.”

If Harry hadn’t been staring at his shoelaces, he would’ve seen the huge smile that was forming on Hermione’s face. “Oh. What else did you want to say?”

He gulped and looked up into her eyes just as she got her expression back under control. “Er, I still mean it. I mean, y-you still mean a lot to me and, er, you’re still beautiful. Only now I d-don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked, walking right up to him.

“Of course. You really do mean a lot to me and you are beautiful.”

“I meant that you don’t have a girlfriend,” she said seductively as she moved her face closer to his. She whispered, “I think you do,” just before their lips met. It was short and sweet and exactly what both of them thought a kiss should be.

“That was...perfect,” said Harry, staring in her eyes.

“Yes, it was,” she agreed.

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An hour later, the front door to the Burrow opened, revealing two smiling young people walking hand-in-hand. Since there wasn’t room for both of them to fit through the doorway side-by-side, Harry gestured for Hermione to go ahead of him, but they never stopped holding hands. Ginny was sitting in the living room, and looked from their happy faces to their entwined hands. A smile spread across her face as she shot up out of her chair.

“You two are positively glowing! I KNOW you’ve been kissing!” They both blushed and looked down. “I had a feeling about you two.” She walked up to Hermione and hugged her quickly and started to approach Harry. They both tensed up and Ginny ended up shaking Harry’s hand. “Er, Congratulations, you two! I think this would’ve happened months ago if not for...you know.”

"Yeah. Thanks," said Harry. "Er, have you sent out your letter to Dean yet?"

She nodded. "Yeah. With Errol. Hopefully he'll survive the trip."

"You could've borrowed Hedwig if Ron's refusing."

"I don't think Dean would like to get a letter from me carried by your owl right now."

"You don't think he'll blame Harry, do you?" asked Hermione.

"I'm not sure what he'll think or even if he's still interested. I just don't want to...complicate things."

"You mean he might want us to completely hate each other, and my letting you borrow Hedwig doesn't exactly give that impression."

"Precisely. Anyway, I told him what had happened and asked him to meet me on the Hogwarts Express if he's still interested."

At that moment, Mr. Weasley came down the stairs with his wife.  
"Hello," he said.

"Oh, hello Mr. Weasley. How are you feeling?" said Harry.

"I'm feeling fine, but Dumbledore couldn't restore my memory, so we're no closer to discovering who bewitched me or why. He left about forty minutes ago. Er, Harry, Ginny, I know I was bewitched, but I'd like to sincerely apologize for what happened. I mean..."

"It's alright, Daddy. We don't blame you."

"Of course not, sir," agreed Harry.

"I'm thankful for that, but I still feel guilty about it." He took a deep breath. "I guess I always will."

"I'm just glad it's over now before any real harm was done," said Mrs. Weasley.

"So am I," agreed Harry. "If you don't mind, I think I should visit Aunt Petunia today to tell her about Number Four Privet Drive."

"That's probably a good idea," agreed Molly.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to come, too," said Hermione, who was still holding Harry's hand. This got the adult Weasleys' attention.

"Er, Harry, Hermione, are you, er..."

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione happily.

"That's wonderful!" she said.

"I think so," said Harry, turning to his new girlfriend. "That's fine, Hermione. I'll be glad for the company. Mrs. Weasley, we should be back by dinnertime." With that, they walked back out the door. "I forgot my bike. I'll be right back."

Before he took a step, Hermione stopped him. "As much as I enjoyed riding your motorcycle, I'd like to take my car if you don't mind."

"Why?" asked Harry.

Blushing, she said, "You mentioned before that you were near my house while you were running errands, so I thought my house might be near where she's staying."

"You're correct, it is."

"Then I'd really like it if we stopped by there on the way back so I can properly introduce my boyfriend to my parents. They should be there around four o'clock. I think you'd make a better impression if we didn't show up on your bike."

Harry tensed up at that prospect. "I-If you want."

"Oh, come on. It's not like you didn't meet them a few years ago anyway."

"I wasn't your boyfriend then," he replied. He shrugged his shoulders and made sure he had his disguise hat in his pocket in case they stopped anywhere. "Alright. We'll take your car."

## Chapter 10 – Meet the Parents

The ride to the house where Aunt Petunia and Dudley were staying was uneventful. Harry told Hermione the directions as they chatted about nothing in particular. He was nervous about being reintroduced to her parents as Hermione's boyfriend, and was glad that wasn't the first stop on their trip. He was broken out of his thoughts by Hermione voicing her own concerns.

"What do you think Petunia will think of me?"

"What?" he asked, looking at his girlfriend like she'd lost her mind.  
"Who cares what she thinks?"

"Well, you're nervous about seeing my parents. She's the closest thing you have..."

"Don't finish that statement," said Harry firmly. "She IS NOT my mother, and we most certainly do NOT need her approval!"

"But you said she's changed since...it happened."

He sighed. "Yes, she seems to have changed, and maybe we can be friends." He smiled. "She might even like you. But she blew her chance to be my mother long ago."

"Then why are you taking care of her?" she asked tilting her head slightly toward him while still keeping an eye on the road.

He blinked and was silent for about ten seconds before coming up with an answer. "Because she's still my mother's sister," he said firmly.

"If you say so," she answered. "Is that the house?"

Harry looked in front of them to see a familiar red brick, two story, four bedroom house with a garage in front of them. "Yes. Pull in the driveway."

Two minutes later, Harry was ringing the doorbell with Hermione standing next to him.

"What are you doing here?" sneered Dudley Dursley as he answered the door, "and who is she?" His eyes began roaming down Hermione's body, making her feel dirty.

"I'm here to talk to your mum, and this is the brightest witch at Hogwarts." She blushed at the compliment. "She knows a lot more creative curses than Hagrid, and I don't think she appreciates you checking her out."

Although his ears turned a little pink, Dudley pressed on. "How do you know? She might like a real man who..."

"Get your filthy eyes off of me or I'll remove them for you," said Hermione with her wand pointed at his now pale face. She then leisurely moved her wand down as she slowly and clearly spoke. "Or maybe I'll remove something else instead." Dudley retreated up the stairs to his room, leaving Harry and Hermione outside with the door opened. They walked inside.

"Dudders, who was that?" came a woman's voice from the kitchen.

"It's Harry. Dudley went upstairs."

"I'll be right there." A minute later, Petunia emerged, still wearing an apron over her yellow dress. "Hello, Harry. Have a seat." She looked at Hermione as both teenagers sat down on the couch. "and this is?"

"Oh, this is Hermione Granger, my girlfriend."

Harry's aunt looked confused. "What about that redhead you introduced me to at...Vernon's wake?"

Harry looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Er, well, that's...complicated. Ginny and I are still friends, just, er, not...Suffice it to say we're not together anymore and now I'm dating Hermione."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry to pry. It's none of my business, anyway." Petunia looked sad.

"Anyway," said Harry, "I have news. I don't know how else to say it. Number Four Privet Drive was burned to the ground last night by Death Eaters."

Petunia sat down on the recliner. "Really?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "The picture was on the front page of our newspaper. The Dark Mark was above the house." She handed her the Daily Prophet. "Dobby saw it when he got your mail and told us."

A few stray tears flowed down the middle-aged woman's cheeks as she glanced at the picture, but then she looked straight into her nephew's eyes. "Then you were right. Moving here saved our lives. Thank you."

"It's no problem," Harry said quickly, looking down at the carpet. "I'm just glad I didn't trust Dumbledore to protect you."

Taking a deep breath, Petunia got up. "Why don't you join us for lunch?"

"We'd love to," answered Hermione before Harry could refuse.

Dudley was silent throughout the meal as the other three chatted. Hermione mentioned that Petunia shouldn't give her insurance company this address in case Voldemort still wants to go after them. Harry gave her the address of a different house he owned, and decided to give that address to his bank as well. Petunia seemed very impressed with Hermione's knowledge on several topics they discussed during lunch. After having Dobby start getting mail from the other house every day, Harry and Hermione left, with Petunia specifically saying, "I'm glad to have met you, Hermione. I do hope we meet again."

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At the same time, Professor Dumbledore was in his office at Hogwarts examining one of his new instruments. He glanced up at his companion.

"Severus, it appears I was mistaken in my prediction. I had thought young Harry would've driven straight to wherever his aunt is now staying to tell her the news of her house, but his motorcycle is still at the Burrow."

"Perhaps the ungrateful, arrogant brat doesn't even care for his family."

"Or perhaps he has found another method to communicate with her. I had hoped to find Petunia Dursley's location so you could relay it to Tom. It would help your status as a Death Eater to lead him to Harry's remaining family, and would help my plan at the same time. If Mr. Potter has no family left, he's much more likely to completely sever his ties to the muggle world, which would tremendously help his popularity with the pureblood families who hold traditional values. Although it would still help if he were to marry a pureblood."

"Then you haven't given up your plans regarding the Weasley girl?"

"No. I can't use that particular girl anymore; it would be too obvious now. I'm lucky that Harry hasn't realized that I sent him treated candies to begin with. Of course, if he does, I'll simply say that I suspect the owl was intercepted during the trip. I'll be sure to express appropriate remorse over the thought that my gifts were used in such a fashion."

"So which girl will you use? I'll need a hair sample to mix the potion for him."

"I think it would be too dangerous to put the potion in Harry's food with the Granger girl nearby. She's too smart for her own good, and I may need to eliminate her for my plan to succeed. I will have to decide on the new pureblood girl and rethink my strategy before school begins."

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In his effort to delay the inevitable, Harry insisted on stopping by the bank before visiting the Grangers to change his address on record from the one Petunia was living at. That was handled very quickly by the same woman who'd helped him on his last visit. Hermione put her

foot down when he suggested they check out the house Harry was claiming as his address.

"Harry, we both know that you are just trying to delay meeting my parents. We also both know it's not going to work. If you still want to check out the house after our visit, I'll be happy to drive there, but not before."

Harry sighed. "Fine, but you'll miss me after your dad kills me."

"And why would he want to kill you?" she asked, exasperatedly.

"Because I'm dating his daughter," he answered as though it were obvious.

"He hasn't killed Viktor, and he dated me."

"Did he ever meet your father?"

"Well, no, but...here we are." She abruptly ended the conversation as she pushed the button on her remote garage opened and pulled into the three-car garage. She parked in between the pair of Mercedes. "Good; they're both home." After practically dragging Harry out of her car and pulling him to the door, she rang the bell, "Just to make sure they're not snogging on the couch when we walk in."

"Hello, honey," said Marissa Granger as she pulled her daughter into a hug. "And who do we have here?" she asked, eying the boy next to Hermione. "Don't tell me this is that scrawny boy named Harry that I met a few years ago?"

"Hermione, is that you?" came a male voice from behind his wife.

Looking at her mother, the teenage girl took the direct approach. "Yes, this is Harry Potter, my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" repeated her father, giving Harry a stern look that caused him to swallow.

"Come on in," said Marissa. She then turned to her husband. "Adam, why don't you get some drinks for us and let's sit down in the living room."

Casting one last glare at Harry, the man said, "Yes, dear."

Holding her boyfriend's hand, Hermione pulled him onto the couch with her while Marissa sat on one of the two recliners facing them.

"Well, I've been reading and hearing about Harry Potter since about a week before Hermione started Hogwarts..."

"Mother!" she said while turning red. Harry looked at his girlfriend with a raised eyebrow.

"I simply mentioned that after reading about your story I did the math to figure out that you would be in my year. That's all!" Her mother chuckled.

"Anyway, before my daughter interrupted, I was going to say that she never mentioned dating you."

Both teenagers blushed and Adam entered the room with a tray holding four cups of iced tea. "Er, well, we started going out today, actually."

"So this isn't any kind of long-term thing, then," said Hermione's father with a look of relief.

"Actually, sir," Harry said, clearing his throat nervously, "I hope it will be long term, sir. She's been my best friend for a long time, so I feel that I know her already, er, and know how brilliant she is, in every sense of the word, and hope that..." He took a deep breath. "...that this, er, relationship becomes, er, permanent, one day, sir."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand affectionately as she blushed. She actually wanted to kiss him, but didn't think that would be a good idea at the present time. Maybe later.

"Do you know what you're saying?" asked Adam as he stood over the seated teenage boy.

"Yes, sir," he answered, looking the man in the eyes no matter how much his instincts told him to run away and hide.

Hermione's father smiled. "Good. Now that that's settled, you can call me Adam." He held out his hand and Harry shook it while continuing to hold Hermione's right hand with his left.

"And call me Marissa," added the smiling woman sitting across from Hermione. "Perhaps now you can shed some light on certain matters regarding Hermione's time at Hogwarts."

"Like what?" asked Harry.

"Well, for one thing, she was injured last June, and has been very evasive about what exactly happened."

Harry glanced between Hermione's horrified face and Marissa's curious face. He didn't bother looking at Adam. "Hermione, if you don't want me to answer, I won't. But I'm not gonna lie."

Taking a deep breath, Hermione answered, "Might as well get this over with."

Harry looked at Marissa with an expression of deepest remorse. "It was my fault. You see, I..."

"You said you wouldn't lie, Harry! It was NOT your fault! You told me not to go with you!"

"Would one of you just tell us what happened?" asked Adam, clearly impatient.

Hermione explained the events of that night, starting with a brief explanation of Harry's connection to Voldemort, pointing out that acting on a vision last Christmas had saved Mr. Weasley's life. Harry then described the vision he'd had, and together they explained how they'd flown to the Ministry, and what had happened there.

"So, how do you take the blame for that?" asked Hermione's mother. "Do you think you should be in Azkaban instead of this Dolohov?"

“No, but...”

“No buts, Harry,” said Adam. “If you do anything to hurt Hermione, then I’ll kill you myself, but you’re not the one who cursed her. I may not like the idea, but you’re in a war, and terrible things happen. The blame lies with the terrorists, not you. They’re the ones trying to kill people. You were trying to save a life.”

“But I shouldn’t have endangered Hermione...”

“You didn’t have a choice about that!” said Hermione firmly. “I’m not going to let you face that danger alone.”

“But I’m the one that has to!”

“And I choose to be at your side! That prophecy didn’t say you have to be alone.”

“What prophecy?” asked Marissa.

Hermione looked horrified. “I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to...”

“I know, Hermione. It’s not really a secret that the prophecy exists, just what it says. They probably should know about it if I’m dating you.” He turned to his girlfriend’s parents to see they were staring at him. “To put it simply, a prophecy was made before I was born that I’d be the only one with the power to destroy Voldemort. He heard part of it and that’s why he killed my parents. He wanted to kill me, but when he tried, his spell backfired. That prophecy is why he won’t leave me alone. Well, that and revenge for what happened to him while trying to kill me as a baby. The point is that there is a reason trouble follows me, and being my girlfriend does place Hermione in danger.”

“The Daily Prophet has had me as your girlfriend for years,” retorted Hermione. “It doesn’t matter whether I actually am or not. Voldemort probably already believes it, so I might as well enjoy the benefits. Harry,” she said gently, squeezing his hand again. “You’re stuck with me.”

Adam spoke next. “It looks like Hermione’s made her choice, and she’s just as stubborn as her mum. If she makes up her mind about

something, then there's nothing anyone can do about it. She seems to have made up her mind about you, long before today. I know I couldn't change her mind about you even if I wanted to."

The young couple stayed at the Granger residence for a few more hours, talking mainly about Hermione's real Hogwarts career, as opposed to the highly edited version of their adventures she'd told her parents. After shaking Adam Granger's hand once more, and being hugged by Marissa, Harry left with Hermione (who'd been hugged by both of her parents).

Harry said he didn't feel like checking out the house Petunia's and his mail was now being sent to, but decided to have Dobby and Winky clean all his houses so they'd have something to do. True to their predictions, they arrived back at the Burrow just in time for dinner.

Time passed quickly after that, and before they knew it, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were at Kings Cross Station. Both Harry and Hermione had their vehicles packed (Arthur had shrunk Hermione's car for her) in their trunks. They watched the Weasleys disappear between platforms nine and ten. A few seconds later, hand-in-hand, the new couple crossed the barrier onto Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters.

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## Chapter 11 – The Calm Before the Storm

To say that the new couple drew attention at Platform Nine and Three Quarters would be an understatement. Every eye was on them. Hermione specifically noticed several girls look first at Harry lustfully, and then at his hand intertwined with hers suspiciously, and finally at her angrily. All Hermione could do is grin back. The last two weeks they'd been dating were among the best she'd ever had. The only thing she could compare it to was when she'd first discovered libraries. '*Only this is better!*' she thought to herself as she gave her boyfriend's hand a squeeze.

Harry, of course, was completely oblivious to the fact that he was now the most fanciable bloke going to Hogwarts as they continued walking toward the train. They boarded the Express, and Hermione turned and kissed Harry. "I've got to go to the prefect meeting. Find us a compartment and I'll be there as soon as I can." She squeezed his hand one last time before letting go.

"Hurry back," he said as he watched her quickly navigate her way toward the prefects' compartment. Once she was out of sight, he turned around to look for a place to sit, and nearly walked right into a girl who was right behind him. It took him a moment to recognize the girl with curly, reddish-blonde hair as Marietta Edgecombe, the girl who'd betrayed the D.A. to Umbridge. He immediately tensed up.

"Oh, er, hi Harry," she said nervously as she put her head down. That made Harry notice something was different about her.

"I see your forehead cleared up," he commented stiffly.

She put her hand on her now clear brow as she looked up. Harry thought she might be almost cute if it weren't for that whole 'traitor' thing. "Oh, yeah. I had...someone take away that curse." She looked down again. "I, I'm really sorry about that. It's just my mother..." She sighed and shook her head. "It's no excuse. I betrayed you, Cho, and everybody because I thought the Ministry was right. Now I know that you were telling the truth all along." She closed her eyes tightly for a few seconds, as though holding back tears. "I'm sorry. I've got to go." Harry watched her disappear into a nearby compartment. He didn't see the smile that formed on her face as soon as her back was to him.

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Harry found a compartment that Neville and Luna were sharing and joined them. A girl named Romilda Vane had tried to get him to sit with her, but he politely declined, saying that he was waiting for his girlfriend to come back from the prefect meeting when he realized she was flirting. Once the door was closed, Neville asked, "Did Ginny make prefect, then?"

Harry was a bit confused by the question. "Ginny? No. Why'd you ask?"

"Because you told that girl Ginny was at the prefect meeting," he answered as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"I did not."

"Yes you did," argued Neville. "You said your girlfriend..."

"Oh, I forgot. Ginny and I...broke up."

"Really?" asked Neville. Harry thought he seemed a bit too happy to hear that news.

Harry took a deep breath. "Yeah. It's...complicated...we're still friends, but the point is that I'm now dating Hermione."

"That's good," said Luna, looking up from her Quibbler with a pair of psychedelic spectacles on her face. "You and Ginny didn't seem natural together. You and Hermione do."

"Er, thanks," he said, wondering if Luna knew just how right she was about him and Ginny not 'naturally' belonging together.

"You're welcome," she said before looking back down at her magazine.

Neville said, "I heard that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle won't be here."

Harry blinked. He'd been so used to the fact that he'd killed them that he forgot it wasn't common knowledge. "Yeah. They...they were killed in a Death Eater attack."

Neville looked confused. "They were killed by Death Eaters? But their families..."

"They were Death Eaters," he yelled, causing both Neville and Luna to jump backwards. "I'm sorry. It's just..." He took a deep breath. "They attacked my house with Bellatrix Lestrange." Neville's expression changed to rage. He took another breath. "Bellatrix killed my uncle. I k-killed Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. She was captured by an auror." He decided not to tell Neville the particulars on how she'd killed Vernon Dursley, given his family history.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know they were the ones who attacked you. The prophet said your house was attacked and your uncle was killed, and that you and the aurors beat them. That was it. A different article said Bellatrix was captured. I never put it together."

At that moment, Ginny flung the door open and walked in lugging her trunk. She looked either angry or sad – Harry couldn't tell which. "Can I join you guys?" she asked.

When they nodded, Neville got up and helped her put the trunk on the rack. She then flung herself on the seat next to Luna and buried her face in her hands. Harry asked, "What's wrong?"

She looked up with an angry expression. "Oh, nothing. I just couldn't stand watching Padma and Dean trying to suck each others' faces off. It's hard to read when you keep hearing that sucking sound."

Harry admired how Ginny had conveyed the real reason for her anger (the fact that Dean was apparently dating Padma Patil when she'd hoped to get back together with him) without revealing it to the others.

"I hope you and Hermione don't do that when she and Ron get back from their meeting," she said as an afterthought.

"I'll keep that in mind. I'm sorry that you had to put up with that," he said, looking at her intently, hoping she'd catch his meaning.

"Don't worry about it," she said with a small smile. "It wasn't your fault."

Luna then looked back up from her article. "Snogging on trains attracts gilholds. When they get on someone, the victim starts saying one thing and meaning something completely different. Then they leap onto other people."

Sometimes Harry wondered just how perceptive Luna was as he and Ginny stared at her.

"Er, that's interesting," said Neville, oblivious.

Before anyone could comment, the door opened again. This time, it was Ron and Hermione. Both seemed very upset. Ron said, "I think that being a Jr. Death Eater is a requirement for becoming a Slytherin prefect! Nott's the new one!"

"Nott?" asked Harry, disgustedly.

"He went on about how pure-bloods make better prefects until I pointed out that it wasn't a Death Eater meeting," said Hermione.

"Do you think he is one?" asked Harry, unconsciously drawing his wand.

"I don't know, but he acts like it," she said.

"I don't want you going on prefect rounds with him," said Harry firmly.

"I can't refuse when I'm scheduled..."

"I suppose," he said while formulating a plan he didn't want to share with the group.

She gave him a knowing look before sitting next to him. "Did you miss me?"

"Every second." He kissed her quickly and put his arm around her.

The rest of the train ride passed quickly as the six of them chatted amicably.

When it was time, they put on their school robes, disembarked from the train, and then rode the carriages to Hogwarts, looking forward to the feast. It was the calm before the storm.

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Please review. Thank you to those who have.

I know this was a short chapter without much happening, but the next one will be a lot better and longer. I promise.

By the way, I've recently started betaing for zeropolis79 (at fanfiction.net). You might enjoy reading his stories.

## Chapter 12 – Just a Normal Week at Hogwarts

As Harry sat in the Great Hall before the sorting, he felt a twinge of guilt as he glanced at an empty spot at the Slytherin table where Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle used to sit.

“It’s not your fault that they became Death Eaters,” whispered Hermione, who was sitting on his right.

“I suppose not,” he responded half-heartedly as he shifted his eyes to the staff table, where Snape was glaring at him with more venom than usual. For a moment he felt a Legilimency probe and immediately blocked it out and shifted his gaze back toward his girlfriend. “How did you know...”

“That you were thinking about them?” She looked at him with a smirk. “You were staring where they used to sit.” She then took on a much more serious expression. “Besides, I know how you think, and you can’t blame yourself for what happened. They attacked you and your family – not the other way around.”

Before Harry could respond, the doors to the hall opened and Professor McGonagall led the first years inside and put the Sorting Hat on a stool. After it had sung about the school’s need to unite, the sorting proceeded, after which Dumbledore got up to speak.

“I hope he doesn’t take too long,” said Ron, who was at Harry’s left, “I’m starving.”

“When aren’t you?” said both Hermione and Ginny (who was across from Hermione) at the same moment, causing Harry to snort as Ron glared.

“Good evening, everyone. Welcome to Hogwarts,” he said with the usual twinkle in his eye. “There is a time for speeches, but this is not one of them. Tuck in.” He gestured with his hands and the food magically appeared on the tables.

“He makes everyone believe that he’s making the food appear,” commented Hermione as she loaded up her plate, “instead of giving the elves their due credit.”

While Ron began eating a drumstick with one hand while overloading his plate with the other, Harry glanced at his girlfriend. "You do have a point. I'd never thought of that. I'd think he would have us clap for the elves the same as we clap for everyone who gets sorted and any new teachers."

"Speaking of which, did you notice our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?"

"AsIngntUmbge," said Ron, as bits of food sprayed from his mouth.

"That is so gross!" commented Ginny with a disgusted expression on her face while Harry tried to ignore him. Hermione's view of Ron was blocked by Harry, fortunately for her.

"You really ought to try to show a few table manners," said Seamus, who was nearby. "Girls don't want to date a bloke who eats like that." The Irish teenager winked.

"I should say not," said Hermione while Ron was swallowing.

"All I said was that any teacher would be better than Umbridge," Ron responded angrily.

Harry nodded as he looked back at the staff table to find a new, yet familiar face. It was a pink-cheeked black-haired witch who was part of the Advance Guard that had helped Harry in his escape from the Dursley house a little over a year ago. He just couldn't remember her name.

"Isn't that Hestia Jones?" asked Hermione.

"That's it," he said before looking at his slightly confused companion. "I couldn't remember her name," he clarified.

After the food vanished, Dumbledore got back up to the podium. "Welcome again to another year at Hogwarts. In the way of announcements, let me introduce your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher – Professor Jones." The students clapped appropriately.

"As always, the Dark Forest remains forbidden to all students. Mr. Filch has asked me to announce that there is a blanket ban on all products purchased from the establishment known as 'Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes,' the owners of which have, incidentally, asked me to announce that they are having a sale on all mail order purchases from Hogwarts for the next two weeks, although I am sure that none of you will have any use for that information." Harry, along with most of the school, laughed and clapped at that announcement. Mr. Filch looked ready to strangle the headmaster, whose eyes were twinkling madly.

"Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch Teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. We are also looking for new Quidditch commentators, who should do likewise.

Dumbledore ended his speech with a warning that Voldemort was now gaining in strength, so students should be careful and abide by the security restrictions, and then wished them a good night.

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Harry was sitting on a couch in the common room that night, reading from his Occlumency book, when someone sat down next to him. He glanced up and grinned. "Hi, Hermione. Have you got your stuff organized? You-know, ten posters of me hanging all over your room."

"I do have a small photo of you displayed," she said with a slight blush. "I'll bet if you signed it, it would be stolen."

He chuckled at that thought. "Sad, but true." He yawned.

"As much as I'm glad you're reading that book, you probably should turn in. We've got to get up at six to exercise."

"Six?" he repeated with his eyes bulged out.

"Of course. We'll need time to shower afterward and get to breakfast on time." She sighed. "Ron and Ginny weren't happy about it, either. I know it'll be hard at first, but we'll get used to it." She leaned forward and kissed him. "Goodnight."

“Night,” he said as he got up and helped her up. “See you in the morning.”

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“Ouch!” The bottoms of Harry’s feet were getting hotter and hotter, causing him to do a clumsy sort of dance. He looked around to see that he was standing on a deserted beach, and his feet were being burned by the sand. The sun was out, and he was wearing nothing but a pair of swimming trunks. At second glance, he noticed that there was one lone occupant lying down on a towel near the water. He made his way toward the spot, and soon realized that it was a beautiful woman with bushy brown hair wearing a white bikini. He smiled as he approached her, and when he was close enough to see her face, he saw that it was Hermione.

“Hello, Harry,” she said seductively as she got up. “Whatever shall we do?” she asked as she put her arms around him. She moved her face closer to his and...”

“BZZZZZZZZ!”

As Harry’s eyes opened, he silently cursed his old-fashioned alarm clock for interrupting what promised to be such a good dream. He turned it off before squinting at it. “Six o’clock,” he groaned. A small smile showed on his face when he mumbled to himself, “Maybe if I get up with no problem, the real Hermione will...”

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud snore. Harry put on his glasses and walked over to the only person he knew who could snore like that – Ron. He pulled back the bed curtains and shook his friend. “Ron, wake up. Ron! RON!!!”

“Whaaa. Just five more minutes, Mum,” the redhead muttered without opening his eyes. He rolled over to his side.

“Wake up!” No response. “There’s a spider!”

Ron jumped out of bed right into Harry as he screamed. They both landed in a heap on the floor. “Harry, why’d you do that?”

"You wouldn't wake up," he said as they got up. "It's time to..."

"What are you two doing up this early?" asked Neville, who Harry turned to see was sitting up.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you," whispered Harry.

"But what are you doing?"

"We're gonna exercise and practice a bit of spell work with Hermione and Ginny."

Neville looked confused for a moment. "Sounds like a small D.A. meeting."

"I suppose," Ron whispered, shrugging.

"Can I come?"

Harry looked at Neville as though he'd grown a second head. "Why do you want to?"

"I figure that you're training to fight Death Eaters. I think after the Department of Mysteries, I could use more training."

"You can come if you want."

The boys quickly got dressed in appropriate clothes, somehow managing to not wake Seamus or Dean, and were downstairs by ten after six.

"It took you long enough," said Ginny while covering her mouth as she yawned. She seemed to be very cranky in the morning. She blinked as her ears turned pink when she noticed an extra boy. "Hi, Neville. I didn't know you were coming."

"Neither did I. I woke up while Harry was trying to get Ron out of bed." Ginny and Hermione giggled while Ron's face flushed. "I asked if I could come. Is that alright?" he asked the girls.

"Sure. Come on," said Hermione as she walked toward the door. They all followed.

Five minutes later, Hermione was pacing back and forth in front of the picture of Barnabas the Barmy while the others waited for the door to appear. Harry suddenly heard footsteps behind him. He pulled his wand and turned around to find he was pointing it at...Luna Lovegood. She was wearing a sweater and jogging pants, and her wand was (as usual) tucked behind her ear. She didn't appear to have been startled.

"Good morning, Harry, Ronald, Neville, Ginny and Hermione," she said, completely ignoring the wand pointed at her. A five-legged pinksuft told me I should be here. What are we doing?" Harry noticed Ron's ears turn pink when his name was mentioned.

The door appeared while Luna was speaking, and Hermione opened it. Hermione answered the girl while Harry stowed away his wand. "We're just exercising and practicing dueling."

"A small D.A. meeting. Sounds interesting. You should have used the D.A. Galleons. I still have mine."

"Me, too," said Neville.

"If we wait too long, the Nargles will get in," the blond girl said before walking into the room. Ron entered next, followed by Hermione, then Harry and the others.

The room looked like a double-sized gymnasium. There were track marks on the floor, and Harry noticed that there was an area designated to jog around the perimeter. He saw five muggle exercise machines – no six – he corrected himself as another appeared. He glanced ahead to see Hermione looking in that direction.

Hermione, appearing a bit nervous, turned to face them. "Alright. We all know that Death Eaters never exercise, so this will give us an advantage over them. This will give us a lot more energy and stamina. It will also allow us to move faster and not get winded easily. I thought we'd warm up with a five minute jog around the track." A timer appeared in her hand. She set it and announced, "Go!" and started jogging. Harry followed her, and heard the others fall in line behind him.

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By the time the alarm went off, Harry was convinced he was about to have a heart attack. He was pouring sweat and panting. He glanced around to see the others weren't in any better shape than him.

"This is much harder than it sounds in the book," said Hermione between gasps. "Give me a minute to catch my breath." After about two minutes of gasping, she continued. "Now, we're going to..."

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She bravely continued going through the exercises from the book she'd read, using the machines to exercise particular muscles. When it was 6:45, they were thoroughly exhausted. Hermione weakly announced, "Now we'll practice dueling for a few minutes. Harry," she said, looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, er, yes. Over the summer, I realized that getting hit by one spell is enough to kill you in a fight, and that the protego shield doesn't block most of the curses Death Eaters use. I think that we should concentrate on not getting hit. That means dodging, hiding behind things, and something that I saw Dumbledore do at the Ministry – summoning objects in front of you. We'll split off into groups of two and..."

Harry was in full 'professor mode' as he explained what he had in mind for the lesson that day, and they practiced dodging for ten minutes before the timer went off again, signaling that it was time to get back to their dorms. On the way back, Hermione assured her boyfriend that once they were more organized, they'd have more time to practice dueling. She also explained how her book suggested different exercises for each day.

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As he was taking his shower, he realized that he felt a certain satisfaction from making it through the exercise regimen. He also felt very awake and alert.

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At breakfast, McGonagall handed out the schedules. Hermione was off to her Ancient Runes class before Harry got his schedule. He grinned as he noted that Potions was not included on his. By now, he'd realized that he didn't want to work for the Ministry of Magic, so he didn't really regret that he wouldn't be an auror. His head of house had expressed regret that Snape wouldn't allow anyone who hadn't achieved an 'O' on their O.W.L. but he said not to worry about it. "I don't think I'd want to follow Umbridge's orders." He remembered that last year, aurors had tried to apprehend Dumbledore and later Hagrid, and that some had attacked McGonagall when she'd tried to interfere with Rubeus' arrest. Fortunately, Hagrid had escaped, but McGonagall was injured. He didn't know what he'd do if he was ordered to arrest one of his friends.

Minerva smiled briefly. "I quite understand, but you should know that the whole Ministry isn't like that."

He shrugged his shoulders, not feeling like arguing with one of his favorite teachers. "Maybe not, but I wouldn't want to work for them."

"Then I suggest we meet this week to have another career consultation. This one will be mercifully free from the opinions of imbeciles and fools."

"I think I'd like that," said Harry, sincerely.

"I'll let you know when at the end of your Transfiguration class tomorrow."

"Thanks." McGonagall then walked off to the next Gryffindor.

Harry looked at his schedule to see that it included Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, and Care of Magical Creatures. He figured that without taking Potions, he had time for Hagrid's class, although he did dread what creatures his first friend had in store for the N.E.W.T. class. He was disappointed that Hermione wasn't joining him, but he understood that she didn't have the time. He also noticed that he was scheduled every Friday afternoon for 'Independent Study' for two hours. He was about to get up to ask his Head of House about it when he was tapped on the shoulder from behind. He turned to see Marietta Edgecombe

standing behind him. Her hair was arranged differently, and for a fleeting moment, he thought she looked attractive.

"Hi, Harry. I was asked to give you this note." She handed him a scroll, making sure to keep her hand on his for a few seconds longer than necessary. "Bye, Harry." She winked at him before turning away, causing his heart to flutter for a moment before he shook his head. Something about that reminded him of when he saw Veelas for the first time at the world cup a few years before.

Harry filed that information away for later use and turned his attention to the scroll in his hand. He immediately recognized the loopy handwriting as that of Professor Dumbledore.

'Dear Harry,

*Our private lessons will be at the time labeled 'Independent Study' on your schedule. I look forward to seeing you this Friday.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Albus Dumbledore.*

*P.S. I like Acid Pops.'*

"I don't have any class for a few hours," said Ron from beside him, "Do you?"

He turned to his friend. "Nope."

"Want to play a game of chess in the Common Room?"

"Sorry. I've got to go to the library."

Ron stared at Harry in shock. It was five seconds later that he finally found his voice. "You've been hanging out with Hermione too long, mate."

He chuckled a bit. "There's just something I want to look up, that's all. I'm not gonna move there."

"I hope not. See you later."

An hour and forty-five minutes later, Hermione entered the library, and was surprised to see her boyfriend sitting at a table pouring over a huge tome. She smiled as she walked up to his table, setting her bag down across from him. He looked up immediately, and for a moment it seemed like he was going for his wand. He grinned when he saw it was her.

“Fancy meeting you here,” said Hermione.

“I suppose you usually come here to avoid me,” he responded cheekily as he glanced at his watch to see he had fifteen minutes before his first class.

“I didn’t say that. As a matter of fact, I’m glad you’re here. I got out of class a few minutes early and thought I’d do a bit of reading. What do you have, there?”

“Oh,” said Harry with a smirk, “A bit of light reading.”

“Ha ha.” She then started reading from the page he was on. “The **cupidoeffecto**r perfume does not require physical contact with the subject to illicit desire, however, touching him or her for at least five seconds will strengthen the affect. It produces an effect similar, though not nearly as powerful, to exposure to Veela. It is not nearly as effective as ingesting a love potion.” She looked at her boyfriend with concern. “Why are you reading this? Do you think someone’s trying to use this against you?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“So either someone’s doing that, or you’re starting to have feelings for another girl.”

Keeping one hand on the book to hold his place, he took her right hand in his and looked her in the eyes. “I love you. Even if my hunch is wrong and I have a tiny attraction to her, you have nothing to worry about. The thing is, I can’t stand her unless she’s next to me.”

**“Who is it?” asked Hermione with a smirk, “Pansy Parkinson?”**

**He snorted slightly. “Almost.” He took a deep breath. “Marietta Edgecombe.” Hermione gasped. “She came up to me on the train while you were at the meeting and apologized. Then this morning she gave me a note from Dumbledore.”**

**“I wonder if she’s part of the plot that made you and Ginny fancy each other,” she said dispassionately, and Harry realized that his girlfriend knew she had nothing to fear from the D.A. traitor.**

**“That’s what I’m wondering. If at first you don’t succeed...”**

**“I wonder if the person who invented that saying realized that it can be used for criminal activities just as easily as for anything else,” said Hermione.**

**“I know that’s how Voldemort feels about killing me,” Harry said with a grin. “Anyway, I think we should be heading to class.” Harry returned the book to the shelf, and they both headed for their first Defense lesson with Hestia Jones.**

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Within a few minutes, they were sitting near Ron in the D.A.D.A. classroom, and Harry was looking around. On the blackboard were two lists of names. One was incredibly long. Most of the names on it were unfamiliar to Harry, but a few names, such as Edger Bones, he recognized from an Order photo he’d seen the previous year. The last two names on that list were James and Lily Potter. The other list was shorter, and began with Cedric Diggory. Harry noted with sadness that Sirius Black and Vernon Dursley were on that list. Although they weren’t labeled, Harry was fairly certain what those lists were.

“Hello, class,” the teacher said after the bell rang.

Harry thought she looked a bit sad. ‘Then again,’ he thought to himself, ‘I’d be sad if I’d just copied down a list of Voldemort’s victims.’

"As you know, my name is Professor Jones. It's my job to teach you defense. Some of you may believe that it is just so that you can pass your N.E.W.T.s. I want you all to realize that this is not the case. The primary function of this class is to prepare you all to survive this war. I'd like to call your attention to the black board. Can anyone tell me what those lists are?"

Harry, along with Hermione, Ron, Neville, and several others raised their hands. The teacher looked at Harry's girlfriend. "Miss Granger."

"The first list consists of those who died in the first Voldemort war, and those on the second list are casualties of the current war." Most of the class flinched at the name.

"Correct. Five points to Gryffindor. I want you all to look at those names. You are just as susceptible to attack as anybody on that list. They are our families and friends, and didn't deserve to die the way they did. My job is to try to make sure your name doesn't get added to the second list. Your job is to make sure I'm successful. I'm now going to take attendance."

The class was in a solemn mood as Hestia went through the first lesson, getting the class to perform their first nonverbal spells. Although that lesson was on shield charms, she mentioned that when facing a Death Eater, the best block is not to be there because the unforgivable curses can't be blocked with a protego shield. She said that they would study and practice every method of avoiding getting hit over the course of the year, mentioning that some of them were physical, and being in good shape would help them to move more quickly. She recommended, but did not require, daily workouts. For homework, she assigned a foot-long essay on the protego shield, including recommendations on when to use it and when not to use it. She also asked for a list of at least five spells that aren't blocked by it, with extra credit for every other spell they can add beyond that list.

-  
That afternoon, Harry found himself in a class of three people standing outside of Hagrid's hut. The other two were Hufflepuffs, one of whom had failed most of their O.W.L.s, so they had to take what

they could. The other one genuinely wanted to work with magical creatures.

The door to the cabin opened, revealing the half-giant with a huge grin on his face. "Good afternoon, class!" he said before his expression changed to confusion as he looked around.

"Good afternoon, Professor Hagrid," said Harry confidently.

"Hi, Harry. Where's Hermione an' Ron?"

"Hermione's already taking seven classes, which is more than is usually recommended. She just couldn't take another class. If I were taking one more class, I wouldn't have been able to be here, either."

"I suppose I understand that. What about Ron? I doubt he'd be takin' extra classes."

"I suppose he's trying to take as few classes as possible. He's only taking four. I'm surprised his mum let him."

"I suppose," said Hagrid. "Anyway, I got a real treat fer ya three today. Follow me inta the Dark Forest."

Harry, along with the others, followed, hoping that he wasn't going to get reacquainted with Aragog today.

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Two hours later, the three survivors made it to the castle, having endured a lesson on Blood-sucking Bugbears, which are a type of magical creature resembling a grizzly bear and believed to eat naughty children (although Hagrid said it was rubbish, "Them're just misunderstood."). The creature he showed them started running after the students halfway through the lesson, but Hagrid, with his immense size and strength, was able to hold it back. He then asked, "Would any a' ya wanna pet it?" while the monster was growling as drool dropped from its mouth. Harry couldn't help but notice the beast's long, sharp fangs.

"How could he show the class one of those?" asked Hermione as her boyfriend described his lesson at dinner. "You might've been eaten! You should drop the course."

"Hermione, could you imagine how much it would hurt Hagrid's feelings if I did that?"

"Fine, but please be careful," she huffed.

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That night, Hermione had her first patrol, as part of her prefect duties. Although she suspected it, she didn't actually know for sure that Harry was following her around under his invisibility cloak. She was currently doing rounds with Anthony Goldstein, a Ravenclaw prefect in their year.

"I was really surprised when I heard you were dating Potter," he said as they walked. Harry clenched his fists.

"Oh, why is that," Hermione said softly. Harry guessed that she thought he'd believe she wasn't good enough for Harry.

"A smart girl like you should know better than to hang out with a guy who keeps getting attacked. He's too dangerous, with You-Know-Who after him."

"Maybe I like brave men," said Hermione with just a tad bit of annoyance in her voice that Harry doubted Anthony would have noticed.

"I know he's better than that other dunderhead you hang out with, Weasley..."

"Ron's not a dunderhead," defended Hermione, now openly angry. "He just..."

"I know Potter's good at defense, but I heard that he had to take remedial Potions lessons last year, and still didn't do well enough on his O.W.L. to be in the class. You should go for someone who's more intellectual. Someone like me."

It took all of Harry's self-control not to start beating that raven-brained good-for-nothing...

"What?!" exclaimed the shocked Gryffindor prefect. "No way. I'm..."

Anthony then roughly took her hand in his, and suddenly her face went blank. "That's it. I know you really fancy me," he said gently.

"Y-yes, I do," she said blankly, staring straight in front of her.

Goldstein slowly leaned forward to kiss her. Just before their lips met, he fell to the right at the impact of an invisible fist making contact with his temple. He let go of Hermione as he fell to the floor. He quickly put his hand over the side of his head, but from the glimpse Harry had of the injury, he was obviously going to have quite a bruise.

Hermione blinked her eyes in surprise as she came out of her daze and noticed the fallen prefect and realized what must have happened. Harry watched her face go from confused to understanding to furious in less than two seconds. She glared at Goldstein. "Er, the next time you grab me, you'll get worse!" she shouted, making a fist.

"What, you couldn't have done that! Who..."

"And I suppose I can't kick you either," she said as she demonstrated her ability to do that, kicking his ribs hard. "I can't believe you tried that! Stupefy!" Even Harry hadn't noticed her drawing her wand. "I'm going to get McGonagall, Harry."

"Want me to levitate that thing behind you?" he asked, still under the cloak.

"Actually, I'd better do that myself so nobody knows you're out of bed."

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Five minutes later, a very tired-looking Minerva McGonagall opened the door to her quarters. "Yes, Miss Granger. What is...what's wrong with Mr. Goldstein?"

"He's stupefied, Professor. He...he tried to use some kind of love potion on me during our rounds." Hermione was now beginning to show signs of stress.

She looked completely shocked. "What? Come in."

"Yes. I don't know if Professor Dumbledore told you this, but during the summer, someone was dosing Harry and Ginny with love potion."

"I didn't know that," the now wide-awake professor said.

"And this morning he mentioned that he wondered if someone was doing something similar to him, but with their perfume. Anyway, Goldstein and I were doing our rounds when he started saying that I should date him instead of Harry. I was disagreeing until he grabbed my hand. Then I went into some sort of trance and suddenly did fancy him. He was about to kiss me when..." She started looking at the floor. "Er, I came out of it and punched him."

McGonagall took a look at the huge bruise on Anthony's face and then at the size of Hermione's hands. "That bruise looks a bit large for your fist to have made, Miss Granger," she said with a small smirk. I would imagine that it was made by someone with a fist the size of Harry's."

Hermione's ears were red and her face was pink. "Er, what d-do you mean, Professor?"

"Recently, the headmaster made me aware that Mr. Potter would most likely be keeping a certain family artifact with him at all times, and instructed me not to confiscate it if I were to ever see, or rather not see, it."

Hermione gulped.

"I would imagine that Mr. Potter is most concerned for your welfare, and wouldn't take too kindly to anyone pulling that particular stunt, especially as you two are now a couple." She then pulled out her wand and pointed it at Anthony, performing a silent spell. He soon glowed bright yellow. "You are correct, Miss Granger. The boy is wearing cologne with **cupidoeffecto**r in it. I shall have him

confined to the Hospital wing so that his injuries can be treated, and then I'll inform the headmaster. You may return to Gryffindor tower, Miss Granger, Mr. Potter."

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The next day, the group of six was ready much earlier to begin their workout, and had more time to practice dodging spells. They were all still exhausted afterward, but Harry felt revived after his shower.

After Transfiguration, both Harry and Hermione were informed by McGonagall that Anthony Goldstein had been acting under the influence of the Imperius Curse, and had lost his memory of the event shortly after he'd been revived. However, because that claim kept so many Death Eaters out of Azkaban, Dumbledore felt that some form of punishment was necessary, lest others decide to behave viciously and use that excuse. Therefore Anthony lost his prefectship, which was given to Michael Corner. Besides, after what had happened, none of the female prefects would feel comfortable doing rounds with him again. His record would say that he resigned from the position, as opposed to losing it for misconduct. McGonagall also informed Harry that she would meet with him that Saturday afternoon after Quidditch tryouts to discuss his career options.

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"Potter, what's your hurry?" came a familiar voice from behind Harry as he walked toward Gryffindor tower. He put his right hand on his wand handle as he stopped to turn around.

"Professor Snape," he said as cordially as possible.

"I must say that Potions class is much more bearable now that I am free of your incompetence, as well as many other Gryffindors from your year. It is unfortunate that I still have to deal with Granger."

"I haven't missed you either, Professor," he said coldly.

**“I must say that even I was shocked at the level of arrogance you displayed in refusing my generous offer to continue your remedial Potions lessons.”**

**Harry forced himself to say, “Thank you for the offer, but it is no longer necessary. I’ve been studying independently.”**

**“How exceedingly arrogant you are, just like your father!” Snape sneered.**

**“If that’s all, may I go, sir?”**

**“Fine. Get out of my sight.”**

**Harry walked away, keeping his hand on his wand and ready to dive out of the way if Snape took a shot at him. He was on the alert until after he was safely in Gryffindor tower.**

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**The rest of the week went by quickly after that. It was starting to get easier for Harry to wake up at six, and he wasn’t getting quite as exhausted during the workout as the first day. Before he knew it, Harry was entering Dumbledore’s office for their first lesson.**

**“Good afternoon, Harry. Sit down,” the headmaster said, with a twinkle in his eye.**

**“Good afternoon, sir.”**

**“Would you like a lemon drop?”**

**“No, thank you.”**

**“Very well. Shall we begin? How much do you know about how the amount of magical power one has available to him affects their ability to cast spells?”**

**This sounded to Harry like the type of question meant for Hermione, not him. “Er, um, I suppose that someone with more**

magical power can cast more spells...without getting tired," he guessed.

"That's partially correct, my boy. However, there are a few other aspects of that concept which are far more important to our lessons. One is that the spells cast by a wizard with greater magical power are stronger. The difference can be as vast as the difference between a breeze and a hurricane. The other aspect is that certain spells can only be cast by an exceptionally powerful wizard."

"Really?" asked Harry, interested.

"Oh, yes. Do you know what determines how magically powerful a wizard or witch is?"

"No, sir."

"Inside every magical being is what is referred to as a magical core. That's what Hogwarts detects in children to determine their eligibility to attend school here. Muggles and Squibs have virtually none. You have a slightly above average magical core. Whereas I, on the other hand, in all modesty, have a very large one."

"I can imagine," said Harry, sincerely. He'd always thought that Dumbledore was the greatest sorcerer in the world.

"Yes," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Alas, that power does me no good when, according to the prophecy, I can't use it to vanquish Voldemort."

"That is too bad," said Harry sadly wishing that Dumbledore could rid the world of Voldemort and take away the burden of the prophecy from him.

"However," the headmaster said with a grin, "I have found a way to transfer some of my power to your magical core...temporarily. I shall, of course, want it back after you've used it to destroy Riddle once and for all."

**Harry's eyes bulged out. "Is that even possible?"**

**"Of course it is, although very few people know it. Imagine how the conservative purebloods would start stealing magic from the muggle-borns to give to their squib children if they knew. You probably shouldn't tell anyone about this, not even Miss Granger."**

**Harry looked affronted. "Why shouldn't I tell Hermione? I trust her completely!"**

**"Of course you do, my boy. Of course you do. I know that she'd never deliberately reveal our secrets. I just feel that she couldn't accidentally let this information slip, perhaps in an academic discussion, if she doesn't have it."**

**Harry looked down, now unsure. "I, I suppose you might be right."**

**"I'm glad you saw reason, Harry. I shall perform the spell now, and then I'll teach you how to control it so that you won't have any accidents in class."**

**"Will it hurt your ability to do magic?" he asked, concerned.**

**With an uncharacteristically grim expression, Albus said, "not with the spells I use everyday, but were I to engage Voldemort again, I would be at a disadvantage." He sighed. "It is a risk I am willing to take for the cause." The twinkle returned to his eyes. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at Harry. "*Eximo modus potentia!*"**

**Harry felt a tingling sensation from the same area as his heart spread out into every fiber of his being. He felt like he'd been in shackles for years and was suddenly released. He was powerful, more powerful than he'd ever felt before. He thought he could do anything as he felt his magic – Dumbledore's magic, he corrected himself, although it felt very natural to him, like this was how he was meant to be – flow through him. He thought he saw sparks fly from his hands for a moment before they stopped. He was still feeling very exhilarated.**

“Very good,” said Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eyes. “The spell was successful. Now, to learn how to control your extra power.” He set a quill down on his desk in front of Harry. “Levitate this quill.”

With a swish and flick, Harry confidently said, “*Wingardium Leviosa.*”

The quill shot up point first, straight into the ceiling. Half of it was lodged in there when Harry inspected his work. He looked terrified. “W-what if I tried to stupefy someone? I could accidentally kill someone in Defense class.”

“That is why we will spend the remainder of our time here teaching you to control exactly how much power you wish to put into your spells. I believe that you’ll be able to do that well enough to avoid any serious accidents, and you’ll know enough to keep practicing this week. Next week I’ll start teaching you new spells that you’ll now be able to use against Voldemort.” He put another quill on the table. “Now, what I’d like you to do is...”

By the time the lesson was over, Harry was confident that he wouldn’t blow up any classrooms by mistake, but still wasn’t confident that he wouldn’t hurt anybody in his dueling the next morning. He resolved to practice that for the rest of the day. He went to the Room of Requirement, bringing up their normal practice room, and had it produce dummies that he repeatedly stunned and disarmed for about three hours before the door opened, revealing his girlfriend.

“Hermione?” he asked, “How’d you find me?”

“You missed dinner, and weren’t in the Common Room, the library, or the Quidditch pitch. I brought you something to eat.”

He walked up to her and gave her a quick kiss. “That was nice of you.”

A table and chairs appeared, and Hermione put his plate on the table. “I suppose you’ve been practicing the new spells Dumbledore taught you.”

His ears turned pink. He didn't want to lie to Hermione. "Er, yeah."

Her eyes lit up rather attractively. "Can I see?"

"Er, Dumbledore kind of asked me not to show anybody what he's teaching me."

Her face went from happy to sad in an instant. "Not even me?"

He sighed. "Not even you. I specifically asked him. He knows you wouldn't deliberately..."

"I understand. I just would like to help you practice."

"I know."

"Anyway," said Hermione, "I thought you'd like to know that I have rounds in a half hour with Nott."

He immediately tensed up. "I'll be right behind you."

"I know," she said with a smirk.

"I wonder if he has the Dark Mark?" said Harry, as he picked up a roll from his plate.

"I hope not."

Hermione looked nervous as she met Theodore Nott just outside the Great Hall.

"Hi, Granger. It's nice to see you." He offered his hand, and she hesitantly shook it.

"Hello, Nott," she said with a neutral voice.

"I'm sure that you've heard a lot of bad things about Slytherins, and Malfoy probably convinced you that they're all true. I want

**you to know that most Slytherins don't follow the Dark Lord. We all just have ambition."**

**"That's good to know," she said hesitantly.**

**"I also heard what happened with Goldstein a few days ago, and want to assure you that I'm not under the Imperius curse."**

**"Okay," she said, "then I suggest we start our rounds."**

-

**An hour later, Hermione and Nott were patrolling in the dungeons chatting amicably.**

**"So you, Potter, and Weasley actually did fight a mountain troll in first year?"**

**"Yes," she said. "That kind of started our friendship."**

**"Malfoy said it was just a story Dumbledore made up to make Potter look good."**

**"That shows what he knew," said Hermione.**

**Harry, who'd been eying the Marauders Map under his cloak, noticed three Slytherins (two seventh years and a fifth year), not including Snape, begin surrounding them. The professor specifically was walking out of a classroom door they'd just passed.**

**"I was telling the truth when I said I'm not under the Imperius," said Nott as he stopped suddenly, "and that most Slytherins don't follow the Dark Lord." Instead of smiling as before, he was sneering at her. She stared at him in shock. "Not even the Imperius Curse could make me kiss a filthy Mudblood like you! I'll have to scourify my hand from shaking yours earlier." He pulled his wand out and pointed it straight toward her as he backed away. Harry pulled out his wand. "I've got her, Professor," Theodore called out.**

**“Miss Granger,” sneered the greasy git, “How nice to see you. It’s even nicer to not see you, Mr. Potter. I know you’re around here somewhere, sneaking around after curfew. Reveal yourself!”** He pointed his wand at Harry, who was between Snape and Hermione. Harry realized that Severus thought he was aiming at Granger.

The head of Slytherin nodded, and four different students joined their professor in pointing their wands at Hermione, saying, **“*Sectumsempra!*”**

## **Chapter 13 – What Should We Do?**

**The head of Slytherin nodded, and four different students joined their professor in pointing their wands at Hermione, saying, “*Sectumsempra!*”**

Using all his new power, Harry shouted, “*Protego*,” as he and Hermione dove to the ground, Harry moving so swiftly that his invisibility cloak slipped, exposing his left arm.

The beam of light from Snape’s wand seemed to be weakened significantly by Harry’s shield, but not completely blocked. Part of it hit Harry’s left hand while he was diving, which immediately began bleeding profusely as Harry swore. Two of the jets of light shooting toward Hermione were completely stopped by the shield, but the other two hit the same spot, enabling one to break through and hit Hermione’s right shoulder, which was where her chest had been a moment before. She screamed in pain as she put her left hand on her wound. Harry could tell from her tone of voice that she was ready to cry. When he saw her collapse as her eyes closed, he lost his temper.

He threw off his cloak, and following Snape’s sneer of, “Potter, how good of...” he pointed his wand and shouted, “*Reducto!*” He then turned toward the other Slytherins before watching the affect of his spell.

Nott aimed his wand at Harry, shouting, “*Avada...*” before being hit with a blast so powerful it separated his body at his chest.

Harry moved out of the way as a green beam of light shot from another attacker. He shot a, “*Reducto!*” at him as well, not only taking off the Slytherin’s head, but a large portion of the wall behind him. Harry, in his fury, calculated that there were two more. He heard footsteps behind him and turned around as he shouted, “*Reducto!*” once again. He watched as his favorite spell blasted the backs of the remaining two. Part of him registered that they had been running away, but he pushed that thought aside as he realized he had to get Hermione to the hospital wing.

As he turned his attention toward her now bloody, pale and unconscious form, he wished he knew emergency healing, but he

didn't. "Wingardium Leviosa," he said as he levitated her and hurried to the hospital wing, remembering to grab his cloak and map before leaving the hallway. He didn't even notice the pain he was in from the wound on his left hand, which was bleeding badly from Snape's last curse. The last thing he saw in that hallway was Severus Snape's head with an expression of shock.

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Madam Pomfrey was sleeping soundly, enjoying a pleasant dream, when suddenly her eyes snapped open. She'd heard a ringing sound that always came when someone entered the hospital wing. With practiced ease, she got up, slipped on her robe, and calmly opened her door, expecting to find someone who woke up ill. Her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets at the sight awaiting her.

Harry Potter, with a pale face, blood all over his robes, and a severe laceration on his left hand was holding his wand with his right. Hermione Granger, also full of blood, not to mention unconscious, was lying on one of her beds. Mr. Potter appeared to be on the verge of entering a state of shock, but she asked the question anyway as she pulled out her wand.

"What happened?"

"A-attacked on prefect rounds."

"Attacked again?" she asked. She, of course, knew about the male prefect who'd behaved inappropriately – under the influence of the Imperius Curse – a few days before. She could see that these wounds were much more serious than those that had occurred during the previous incident. "What spell?" she demanded.

"S-sectumsempra," he answered.

She turned her wand on Hermione's shoulder. "Mr. Potter, can you get me three bottles of blood replenishing potion?" she asked a few seconds later. She wanted to keep Harry from spacing out, plus she could use the help. She diligently closed the wound, which wasn't as bad as it could have been from that dark spell. She wondered if it had gone through a shield.

As soon as the wound was closed, Harry came up to her. He looked very scared. "Is this what you wanted?"

She nodded upon reading the labels and took them, pouring them down Hermione's throat and using her wand to make the girl swallow. "Will she be alright?" he asked shakily after the last bottle had been emptied.

"I believe so, but she will have a scar. Now, I'd like to take a look at your hand."

He blinked. "My hand?"

"Yes. Your left hand is wounded as well. You've been bleeding all over my floor."

Harry looked down, and for the first time registered his wound. He held out his hand to her, and she examined it with her wand, closing it without any problems. "I think you should drink a blood-replenishing potion as well. I think that'll be my last one."

"Yeah," Harry said as he took the bottle from the shelf. He opened it and started drinking.

"I'll have to ask Professor Snape to make more."

If Harry hadn't just swallowed, he'd have spit it out. "Can't. He's dead." Those were the last words he'd speak for several hours. He went into shock as the reality of what had happened hit him.

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Harry opened his eyes to find that he was lying in a bed in the hospital wing. It took him a few seconds to remember why he was there. Once he did, he looked around in a panic, only to find his girlfriend in the bed next to him with a book in her lap, and a sling on her arm, reading. He breathed out a sigh of relief, which seemed to get Hermione's attention, for she immediately turned toward him.

"You're awake. Thank goodness." He noticed that she was wearing hospital clothes and glanced down to see that he was, too.

"So are you. For a few minutes, I thought..."

"Madam Pomfrey said that if you'd taken just a few minutes longer, I would've been," she said solemnly. "You saved my life."

Before Harry could respond to that, Madam Pomfrey came into the room with a breakfast tray. "I see that you're awake, Mr. Potter. I had to give you a dreamless sleep potion after you brought Miss Granger here. She told us what happened before she passed out."

"Us?" repeated Harry.

"The headmaster and the aurors," said Hermione. "They needed an explanation." She took a deep breath. "Especially after they saw...the results."

Harry closed his eyes as he remembered the revolting sight he'd left behind. He'd killed five more people. He hung his head in shame. "I, I,"

"I understand," said Hermione. "You did what you had to do to save us."

"Stupefying them didn't even occur to me. When you fell, I just...lost it."

Madam Pomfrey said, "I couldn't believe that Professor Snape would've orchestrated such a cruel attack on Miss Granger. Professor Dumbledore, as well as the aurors, will be by shortly to take your statement. Make sure you eat your breakfast." She then walked off and Harry began eating.

"I know it seems cruel to say so," said Hermione, "but the school is probably better off now."

"But I killed five more people. If I'd..."

"If you hadn't done that, we'd both be dead. If you hadn't been there, I would be dead. Harry, you did the right thing."

"It doesn't feel right."

"That means you have a conscience," said Hermione. "You don't enjoy killing people like Voldemort does."

"I suppose," said Harry.

"Oh, by the way," said Hermione. "Ginny, Neville and Ron were here earlier. Ginny's currently holding Quidditch tryouts, but she said you'll be on the team, so don't worry about missing it. Ron's trying out for Keeper, and Neville's there to watch. I think he fancies Ginny."

Harry grinned, happy to think of something else. "I think he does, too." He then chuckled a bit. "I can imagine how mad Ron'll be if a better Keeper shows up and Ginny picks them over him."

Hermione giggled. "That would be potentially problematic."

"Hello, Harry and Hermione," came Luna Lovegood's voice from the entrance. "A five-legged pinksart told me you two were here. What happened? Did the seven-horned Fleetstraples attack you last night?"

Hermione and Harry shared a grin. She said, "No, Luna. It was Professor Snape and four Slytherins. They tried to kill me."

"I always thought that Professor Snape was possessed by Worfgings," she responded sadly. "I guess this is the proof."

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Luna stayed and chatted for a few minutes, and then left just before Dumbledore came in, accompanied by two aurors Harry didn't recognize. He figured that the Ministry probably had an idea which aurors the Headmaster was friendly with, and made it a point not to send them.

"Hello, Harry," said Albus with the usual twinkle in his eye. "How are you feeling?"

"I've been better," said Harry icily, "Now do you believe me that Snape wasn't on our side, or do you still trust him?"

The twinkle left Dumbledore's eye. "Alas, I must admit, given the evidence, that I was mistaken to trust him. This is Auror Taylor and Auror Hale. Now, can you tell us your version of events? According to Miss Granger, you were following her and Mr. Nott under your Invisibility cloak. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"So, it would appear that she was the intended target?" Albus said. He knew that he'd discussed eliminating Granger with Severus, and figured that he'd simply 'jumped the gun' on that plan, to disastrous results.

"I suppose so," responded Harry.

"Why don't you start from the beginning, Mr. Potter?" said one of the aurors. Harry didn't remember what his name was. He took a deep breath. "Because of the trouble in this school, I've been following Hermione on her rounds to make sure she survives them. Last night..."

After Harry told them everything he could remember about the attack, all the way until he got to the hospital wing, Auror Hale asked, "How were you able to shield the Sectumsempra curse? No shield is supposed to work against it." The Boy-Who-Lived didn't notice, but his girlfriend in the nearby bed put her book down to pay attention.

"It didn't work very well, did it?" Harry asked sarcastically. "That's why we're here and not the Gryffindor common room."

"But still," said the auror.

"Mr. Potter is a bit...gifted when it comes to resisting dark curses," said Dumbledore vaguely. "Surely you are aware of his story. No one to this day can explain that, and I suspect this will be just as difficult to explain."

"Of course," said Auror Hale, not looking entirely convinced, but realizing that it wasn't needed for his report.

When they were finally alone again, Hermione immediately rounded on Harry. "How were you able to shield against that curse?"

Harry appeared a bit nervous. "Well, I've been practicing..."

"The Protego shield isn't designed to handle that, and I know that's what you used."

"Er, well..."

"Answer me, Harry. You know you can't lie to me."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Fine. I wanted to tell you anyway, but Dumbledore told me not to. He transferred some of his powers to me."

Her eyes bugged out. "He what? That's impossible. If that were possible, the purebloods would be stealing power from muggle-borns and giving them to squibs."

"That's why he wanted it kept secret."

"But there's no way...A magical core can't be altered. You always have the same amount of magical power available to you. The only way for a wizard's power to seem to increase is if..." Her face took on a worried expression. "Describe the spell Dumbledore used on you."

"Er, well, he said some Latin words, and I felt like I'd...been freed. It felt like I'd been locked in jail for years and was suddenly released. I had no idea how it felt to be so powerful. I'll miss that when I give it back to Dumbledore. The magic doesn't even feel strange. It's like it belongs to me. I was afraid it would seem a bit unnatural."

"Tell me the incantation, Harry," said Hermione, who appeared to get more distressed with each word Harry said.

"Um, well, it was something like, "**Exam modes potential**"

"Do you mean, '**eximo modus potentia**'?"

"Er, yeah. I think that's it. Why?"

She closed her eyes and muttered, “Why don’t they teach Latin here?”

**“Eximo means release. Modus means bound. Potentia means power. He released your bound power, which means that your power was bound in the first place. Words like ‘affero potentia’ would be used to give you power.”**

Harry looked confused. “You’re saying that my power was bound, and all Dumbledore did was release it?”

She nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“Then why would he lie to me?”

Taking a deep breath, Hermione answered, “There’s only one reason I can think of for him to lie, and that was if he bound your power in the first place, probably just before leaving you with the Dursleys.”

“But if he just didn’t want to admit that he was the one who’d bound my power, why didn’t he just say that Voldemort had done it when I got my scar. Hold on. He said he wanted to take the power back, which I suppose means he’d re-bind my powers.”

She closed her eyes in concentration, as her expression turned very angry. “Maybe he wants you to think that you owed your victory to him. But that doesn’t make any sense.” She looked very worried. “I don’t know what we should do about it.”

He sighed heavily. “I wonder if I should just leave school if he’s going to lie to me.”

At that moment, the door to the hospital wing swung open, revealing Professor McGonagall. “Hello, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger.”

“Hi,” said both teens together.

“How are you both feeling?”

“Alright,” said Harry.

“Fine,” said Hermione.

“I couldn’t believe it when I found out that Snape attacked you. I never liked him, but the headmaster always said how much he trusted him. I see now that I was wrong to blindly follow everything he says. Sometimes even Professor Dumbledore can make mistakes.”

“I never trusted Snape,” said Harry. “He never bothered to pretend to be on my side, so I didn’t see any reason to trust him.”

“I, I suppose you’re right. Anyway, Mr. Potter, I believe we have an appointment for career counseling. If you don’t mind having Miss Granger present, I thought we could have that conversation here.”

Harry glanced at Hermione and smiled. “I don’t mind. I’m sure she won’t be as bad as Umbridge.” He laughed at the indignant glare she gave him. “Seriously, though, I very much value Hermione’s opinion, and would like to hear what she has to say on the matter.”

“Thank you, Harry,” she said evenly, apparently still not completely over being compared to Umbridge.

“Well,” said Harry, sighing. “I already said I don’t want to work for the Ministry, so what does that leave?”

“Many diverse options,” said Minerva. “You could be anything from a curse breaker to a Quidditch Player. You could even open your own business.”

Harry smiled. “My very own joke shop.”

“If you wished, although I can’t picture you doing that for a living.”

“Besides,” said Hermione, “he’s already a silent partner with Fred and George.”

“Really,” asked McGonagall, surprised. “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“He gave them his Triwizard winnings.”

“You what?” asked Minerva, now staring at Harry.

"I figured that with what's coming, we'd need all the laughter we could get." His expression turned more serious. "Do you really think that I'm good enough to play Quidditch professionally?"

Professor McGonagall gave him a rare smile. "Yes, I do, and if you do make a career out of that, don't forget to tell everybody that I discovered your talent."

"What about teaching?" suggested Hermione, causing both Harry and Minerva to look at the girl in disbelief.

"Teaching?" asked Harry. "I couldn't..."

"You did last year," argued Hermione, "and very well. I believe you were the best defense teacher I've had."

"No," said Harry. "Professor Lupin..."

"Was good, but you were better," argued Hermione before turning toward their head of house. "You weren't at the D.A. meetings, so you wouldn't know, but he was completely natural at teaching, and managed to help all of us tremendously."

"I did notice that the O.W.L. scores of those students on the list Umbridge found were substantially higher than the rest of the students. I must admit that I was shocked at how well Mr. Longbottom did."

"It's all thanks to Harry," declared Hermione enthusiastically.

"No, it wasn't me. I just..."

"Now is not the time to be modest, Harry. You really did help us tremendously." She took a deep breath. "You really are a wonderful teacher."

Minerva responded, "I cannot think of a higher recommendation than that, Mr. Potter. I suggest you very seriously consider it."

"Um, what would I need to do if I wanted to do that?"

"Well, your Outstanding O.W.L. score in that subject certainly has you moving in the right direction. You would need an outstanding N.E.W.T. in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and at least an exceeds expectations N.E.W.T. in three other subjects at a minimum to be considered here at Hogwarts. Of course, it is not usually our practice to hire teachers right after they've graduated. You could conceivably have a career in Quidditch until you're about thirty, and then come back to teach, provided that you don't let your defense skills slip."

"I know that this is an unusual question," said Harry, "but could I take those exams if I left Hogwarts?"

Minerva stared blankly at him for three seconds before blinking. "Er, well, yes you can. Witches and wizards who for one reason or another cannot attend magic school do that. You may arrange to take any O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. you'd like with the Ministry any time. You simply make an appointment with the Department of Education. Of course, there is a fee for that. It's covered in your Hogwarts tuition, but if you're not a student here, you obviously wouldn't have paid that tuition. Are you thinking of leaving us?" Hermione frowned but remained silent.

"Please don't tell anyone else, including Professor Dumbledore," said Harry, while Hermione remained silent. "This school has become very dangerous, and I'm not sure that it's a good idea to stay here. I mean, how many times has Hermione already been attacked this year?"

Minerva hung her head down. "I, I don't know what to say. As I understand it, both of you were almost killed. I can't blame you for the way you feel. Of course, I do believe that now, most, if not all, of your enemies here have been...eliminated," she said sadly.

Harry took a deep breath. "I know, and I haven't made my decision yet." He looked at his girlfriend. "And I won't leave as long as Hermione's here." Her expression lightened a bit. "So, I suppose it's up to her, although if anything else happens, I will be trying very hard to convince her to leave."

"I do understand, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, and will respect whatever decisions you make regarding that. However, as a teacher, please let me encourage you to stay in school."



## Chapter 14 – Flight of the Phoenix

“Hi, guys,” said Ginny, as she, Neville and Ron entered the hospital wing.

“How’d tryouts go?” asked Harry.

“Well,” said Ginny with a smirk, “the star Seeker decided to skive off. Says he’s hurt. I think he’s faking.”

“Ha-ha,” said Harry. “Very funny.”

“Well, Katie Bell, a girl named Demelza Robins, and myself are Chasers. Demmy is actually pretty good, especially at dodging Bludgers. We’ve got a couple new Beaters named Coote and Peakes. They’re alright, but not experienced yet. It was a tough call for Keeper. Both Ron and some git named McLaggen seemed to be evenly matched. However, the way that pompous prat acted, I didn’t want him on the team. He said he was gonna complain to McGonagall that I picked Ron over him.”

“Ron was on the team last year,” said Harry. “That should count for something. Besides, there’s been at least one Weasley on the team for over ten years,” Harry said, “and now two of them have been captains. Quidditch is as much a part of your family as red hair. McGonagall can’t take Ron off the team.” Harry’s countenance took on a more serious tone. “Did anybody try out as Seeker?”

Ginny snorted. “No way. Do you think anyone in Gryffindor is stupid enough to think they’re better than you?”

“Were there any good Chaser hopefuls that didn’t make the team?” he asked.

“One or two. Why?” Ginny asked, looking confused.

Harry could see that Hermione knew exactly what he was thinking, but their visitors didn’t have a clue. “Could I make a suggestion?”

“Of course, Harry,” said Ginny.

"Pick the best of those hopefules and ask them to be on the team as a reserve – going to the practices and everything. That way, if I..." he looked around, trying to figure out the best way to make the suggestion without giving away the possibility that he'd leave the school. "If I end up here again on a game day, you can play Seeker and have that person be a Chaser. They'd be better if they'd been practicing with the team, don't you think?"

Ginny's eyebrows came a bit closer together while she thought about it. "That might be a good idea. You do end up in here a lot. Plus, if any other Chaser is hurt they can play. Dean would probably be the best choice." She took a deep breath. "I suppose I'll talk to him about it...if I can separate him from Padma long enough." She looked sad for a moment before smiling. "Do you know that I had to kick her off the pitch because she wanted to watch Dean try out? I had to remind her that she's a Ravenclaw."

Hermione piped up. "She wasn't spying for Ravenclaw. She just wanted to watch her boyfriend. I mean, Neville came and watched you," she said with a smirk.

Both Ginny and Neville turned scarlet and looked down at the floor. "That, that's totally different!" declared Ginny as she studied her shoelaces, "We're not...I mean...He just wanted to see if Gryffindor had a good team this year. Isn't that right, Neville?"

"Y-y-yes," he stuttered.

"Sorry," said Hermione, not looking at all penitent. Harry had a hard time not laughing. "I just knew that you both were each other's first date and..."

"Well," said Ginny, still not looking at either of them, "You were mistaken. Neville and I are just friends."

"I see."

"Good," said Ginny, now looking up. "Now that that's cleared up, how are you two feeling?"

"Much better," said Harry.

"I always knew Snape was a Death Eater," declared Ron. "I'm glad you gave him what he des..."

"Ron!" said Ginny. "Try to be a little more sensitive. I don't think Harry wants to be congratulated."

"No," said Harry, miserably. "I just want these attacks to stop."

"Hello, Harry, Hermione, Ginevra, Neville and *Ronald*," said Luna as she entered the hospital wing. Harry noticed Ron's face turn a bit pink. "Since the glorptbeads are back in the Quidditch pitch, I figured that Gryffindor's tryouts were over."

"Yeah," said Neville. "Ginny let herself on the team."

"That's a relief," said Luna casually. "It would be unfortunate if the captain had to dismiss herself from the team."

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The next day, the young couple was released from the hospital wing, but not early enough to do their exercises, which they would get back to the next morning. Potions classes for that week were cancelled so that a new instructor could be found. However, that only affected Hermione and not Harry since he wasn't in the class.

Aside from that, classes proceeded normally. In Care of Magical Creatures class, Hagrid expressed disappointment that Dumbledore wouldn't let him show the class a dragon. Instead, he showed them a chimaera, which the book, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, described as, "A vicious, bloodthirsty creature with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a dragon's tail." Again, Hagrid said, "Them're just misunderstood creatures." Harry wondered when the basilisk lesson would be ("Now, don' they have pretty eyes? Everyone look.") The beast hit one of the Hufflepuffs with its tail before Hagrid calmed it down, so the victim was relaxing in the hospital wing while Harry was having dinner, telling his girlfriend about his latest adventure.

Hermione was outraged. "He can't show them! Even Chimaera eggs are classified as Class A Non-Tradable Goods. Those monsters have been known to kill people; the most notable was Dai Llewellyn, the

famous Caerphilly Catapults player, who was killed by a Chimaera while on holiday in Greece. What is Hagrid thinking?!? He should be showing you creatures like the Clabbert!"

"The what?" asked Harry.

"The Clabbers. It's sort of a cross between a monkey and a frog. The point is that they're friendly creatures that aren't known for killing every human they see."

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The rest of the week went smoothly, and Harry was able to show up at the two Quidditch practices Ginny had on Tuesday and Thursday. He noticed that she did have Dean at the practices, improving his flying skills and learning Chaser formations so that he could easily replace another player, should the need arise. Ginny even practiced catching the Snitch on Thursday.

Before Harry knew it, he was back in Dumbledore's office for his second lesson. He was very nervous about it, since he now knew the headmaster had lied to him. He decided not to tell Dumbledore that he knew the truth about his magical core, electing to simply learn the spells that the manipulative professor wanted to teach him, but not to let him perform any spells on him. After all, Voldemort was after Harry, so he did need to learn a lot more defense than he already knew. Therefore, the Chosen One thought that the lessons would be beneficial.

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"Good afternoon, Harry. Sit down," the headmaster said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Harry, trying to hide his nervousness. He glanced around the room until his eyes rested on an empty golden perch.

"Would you like a lemon drop?"

"No, thank you, sir," said Harry, automatically. "Er, where's Fawkes? I don't think he was here last week, either."

Dumbledore's ears went pink, but he spoke with his normal, grandfatherly voice. "Fawkes, naturally, comes and goes as he chooses. Would you like to start our lesson?"

Harry nodded his head while thinking about things he'd read about phoenixes, and wondered if Fawkes left Dumbledore because of his deceit. Phoenixes only stayed with completely light wizards. However, he knew that if Fawkes had left him, Dumbledore would never admit it.

"Very well. Today, we shall learn the *Flamma Funis* spell, which creates a rope of flames."

"Like you used in the Ministry against Riddle?" asked Harry, remembering the aged wizard's battle with Voldemort.

"Exactly. Now, normally, I perform this spell nonverbally, which, by the way, you should be learning to do this year, but it will work either way. Therefore, I'll teach you to do it while saying the words, but encourage you to learn to do all of your spells without speaking. It tremendously speeds up your spell work."

"Alright," said Harry, agreeing with that statement.

"Now," said the professor, "This particular spell can be used by more people than some of the others that I'll show you later, but I feel that it's a good place to start with your advanced defense lessons." Aiming his wand at the other side of the room, and brandishing it like a whip, Dumbledore said, "*Flamma Funis*." A rope of flame appeared, striking the wall where he was aiming. "Now watch how I control it, Harry." The student watched the professor move his wand at different angles, and observed how the rope moved with it, even becoming a large lasso when Albus moved his wand in a small, circular pattern. He then moved his wand down quickly, and the rope disappeared. "Now, you try."

Harry imitated the headmaster's motions exactly and said the incantation. He smiled as flames began to shoot from his wand, but unfortunately, his aim was off. The end of the rope hit Dumbledore's

bookshelf, and one of the books caught fire. "OH NO!" he exclaimed, banishing the spell and running toward the book, intent on using the water spell on the ancient tome.

Dumbledore flicked his wand and the flames disappeared. "Fortunately, my boy," he said with a small chuckle and a twinkle in his eye, "I've made all my books flame-proof. They will appear to burn if exposed to fire, but will not be damaged."

"That's good," said Harry.

"Now, try again."

Within minutes, Harry was smiling as he mastered this spell, and was testing his speed and wrapping a dummy Dumbledore had conjured in flames. Suddenly, the door burst open, revealing Mr. Filch. Harry put out his flames as the caretaker declared, "Peeves has gone too far this time!" The squib seemed on the verge of tears to Harry. His next statement explained why. "He's hung Mrs. Norris from a hoop on the Quidditch pitch."

Harry's eyes widened and he felt a bit sickened. Dumbledore asked, "He's killed your cat? That seems..."

"No! She's got a rope tied around her belly and she's hanging from the hoops about fifty feet off the ground and swinging back and forth. She's terrified! I demand that you banish Peeves for this offense!"

Harry had a very had time not laughing at that picture. He found himself wishing that Dumbledore's office had a view of the pitch like McGonagall's did. The headmaster replied, "I will get Mrs. Norris back to safety and speak to Peeves. Harry, stay here and continue practicing. I shouldn't be long."

Once the door closed, leaving Harry alone, he said, "*Flamma Funis*," once again, releasing a flame whip once more. He moved his wand to bring the whip toward him, but it was coming at him too fast to control. He ducked out of the way, and the whip went over his head, behind him, and finally slapped the black cabinet that stood beside Fawkes' perch, making a loud clang. Harry turned to see the piece of furniture shake slightly, opening up to reveal Dumbledore's Pensieve. Harry

was a bit surprised to see silvery thoughts inside it, and was revolted to see the face of Severus Snape staring at him from inside. Shaking himself, and realizing that the headmaster had probably been trying to determine the reason for Snape's final act, Harry allowed his curiosity to get the better of him, not for the first time in his life. He walked up to the Pensieve and stuck his wand tip on Snape's face, and bent forward. He found himself falling down until he landed in the very same office he started at, only this time, he wasn't alone.

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*Professor Dumbledore was in his office at Hogwarts examining one of his new instruments. He glanced up at his companion. If Harry could've punched a memory, he would've as he saw the greasy murderer talking to the headmaster. He did notice that Fawkes wasn't in the room then, either.*

*"Severus, it appears I was mistaken in my prediction. I had thought young Harry would've driven straight to wherever his aunt is now staying to tell her the news of her house, but his motorcycle is still at the Burrow."* Harry realized what day this must have been, and wondered why Dumbledore had been studying this memory. He also realized that the headmaster was tracking his bike, and was thankful he'd ridden with Hermione instead.

*"Perhaps the ungrateful, arrogant brat doesn't even care for his family."*

'Typical Snape,' thought Harry.

*"Or perhaps he has found another method to communicate with her. I had hoped to find Petunia Dursley's location so you could relay it to Tom."* Harry's eyes went wide as he felt fury begin to fill his chest.

*"It would help your status as a Death Eater to lead him to Harry's remaining family, and would help my plan at the same time. If Mr. Potter has no family left, he's much more likely to completely sever his ties to the muggle world, which would tremendously help his popularity with the pureblood families who hold traditional values. Although it would still help if he were to marry a pureblood."* Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing.

*"Then you haven't given up your plans regarding the Weasley girl?"*

*"No. I can't use that particular girl anymore; it would be too obvious now. I'm lucky that Harry hasn't realized that I sent him treated candies to begin with. Of course, if he does, I'll simply say that I suspect the owl was intercepted during the trip. I'll be sure to express appropriate remorse over the thought that my gifts were used in such a fashion."*

Harry muttered a string of profanities he'd once heard his uncle say about him as rage began to fill him. His face was completely red.

*"So which girl will you use? I'll need a hair sample to mix the potion for him."*

*"I think it would be too dangerous to put the potion in Harry's food with the Granger girl nearby. She's too smart for her own good, and I may need to eliminate her for my plan to succeed. I will have to decide on the new pureblood girl and rethink my strategy before school begins."*

Harry's fists were clenched tightly, one of which was holding his wand tightly. Harry wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of his ears. Not only was Dumbledore manipulating him, but he'd been the one to give him the love potion and ordered the attempt on Hermione's life. He felt humiliated that he hadn't figured it out before; betrayed by the man he'd admired above all just a few months before; and angrier than he'd ever felt before. He was shaking with rage when he found himself sucked back into reality.

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Harry looked around, and was glad to see that he was still alone. He knew that he'd have taken a shot at Dumbledore if he'd been in the room, and would've probably gotten himself killed or Obliviated. He ran out of the room and straight to Gryffindor Tower, forgetting to close the cabinet on the way out.

About sixty seconds later, the door to the headmaster's office opened again, revealing the wizened old man in his plum robes with a twinkle in his eye. "Harry," he called jovially, as he looked around for his pupil.

He continued to call as he glanced in the other rooms of his quarters, until his eyes rested on the open black cabinet and the Pensieve inside of it. He muttered a swear word.

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Harry had made it to the Common Room without being stopped by anyone. He didn't see any teachers during the walk, and the few students he saw got out of his way immediately, as it was quite obvious that the Boy-Who-Lived was truly miffed at somebody. He shouted the password at the Fat Lady, who opened the door while saying something about bad manors. He looked around to find Hermione, Ron, Neville and Ginny sitting at a table together revising. He walked up to his friends. "We have to talk, now."

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"I can't believe it," said Hermione, with a pale expression on her face. "He's, he's supposed to be a hero."

"Hero or not," growled Harry from his bed in the sixth-year boys' dorm, which they'd warded off for privacy, "that son of a..."

"Harry, language!" nagged Hermione.

Ron said, "It looks like he ordered your death, Hermione! The old man deserves to be called a..."

"I know what he is," said Hermione angrily, "but that's no reason to use foul language."

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Ginny, who was holding Neville's hand.

"He controls this school," said Hermione, hanging her head down sadly, "S-so I c-can't stay here." She looked at her boyfriend. "And neither can you."

He took a deep breath. "I know."

"We'll leave, too," said Neville.

"No," said Harry. "You guys and Luna should be fine. If just Hermione and I leave, then he'll think she's the only one I told. I do want you to learn Occlumency, though, in case he asks you questions. In the mean time, I can't tell you where we're going." He then grinned at Ginny and Ron. "Besides, if you two leave, Gryffindor will have no chance for the Quidditch Cup."

"Boys," muttered Hermione, although he could see the hint of a smile on her face.

Begrudgingly, the others agreed to stay at Hogwarts. Ron and Neville helped Harry pack while Ginny helped Hermione. Harry was glad that he'd purchased the trunk that could fit anything into it and shrank down into a wallet. He could easily carry all of his and Hermione's stuff in his pocket. Hermione believed that his motorcycle couldn't be traced while it was inside the magical trunk, and that she'd be able to remove the trace once she turned seventeen in a few weeks. When he came downstairs carrying his trunk, he did draw some attention from his fellow Gryffindors. He felt he should say something. He cleared his throat.

"Er, well, some things have happened, and I think it would be best if I left the school." At that moment, Hermione came downstairs with her trunk. He opened his and helped her stuff her trunk inside his. "Er, Hermione, too."

"Is this about those attacks?" asked Lavender.

"Yes," Harry answered, as to everyone's astonishment, his trunk became a wallet, which he stuffed hastily into his back pocket. They had everything of theirs, except for the Occlumency book and Marauder's Map, which Harry left with Ron. Harry's cloak was in another pocket.

"Give Luna our love," Hermione told Ron while winking, causing him to blush.

"I-I'll say goodbye for you, but I'm not giving her...love."

"I'd suggest you keep training," said Harry, changing the subject.

“Bye,” said Hermione, before turning to her boyfriend. “Let’s go.”

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They opened the portrait door with their wands out, ready for anything. No one was there, which made them more worried. They put on Harry’s Invisibility cloak, and then quickly and silently made their way toward the third floor, finally reaching the statue of the one-eyed witch.

Harry glanced up and down the corridor, took off the cloak (stuffing it in his pocket) and tapped the statue with his wand, whispering, “*Dissendium*.”

At once, the statue’s hump opened wide enough to admit a fairly thin person. They quickly glanced up and down the corridor once more, and squeezed their way through, with Hermione going first.

They both slid a considerable way down what felt like a stone slide, than landed on cold, damp earth. “Lumos,” said Hermione, lighting up part of the passage. She turned to Harry and asked, “What’ll we do if someone’s guarding the other end?”

“Er, hopefully we’ll be able to get past them under the cloak.”

“Maybe that would’ve worked,” came the voice they least wanted to hear. A wand about twenty feet in front of them lit up, revealing the face of Albus Dumbledore. There was no twinkle in his eyes now.

Fury took over Harry’s mind as he pointed his wand at their adversary. “DUMBLEDORE! YOU GAVE ME THAT LOVE POTION! YOU ORDERED SNAPE TO KILL HERMIONE!”

“Not precisely,” said Dumbledore. “Professor Snape moved too quickly to attack. I would’ve tried a few more tricks before deciding it was necessary.” He sighed. “Of course, now you’ve given me no choice.”

“NO CHOICE?! Do you think I’m gonna...”

“Tut, tut. You are so insubordinate,” said Albus while shaking his head. “Perhaps Severus was right about you. Irregardless, you’ll do

nothing about it, since after I kill her, I'll give you a new memory. You'll return sadly to your dorm crying that dear Hermione told you she hated you and didn't want anything more to do with you. You'll then find comfort in the arms of..."

"*Flamma Funis!*" shouted Harry, sending a fire-whip at Dumbledore, who merely waved his wand nonchalantly, causing the whip to turn around and slap Harry in the face, breaking his glasses and pushing him on the ground.

"*Reducto!*" shouted Hermione, sending a spell at the headmaster, who disappeared, letting the blast hit the wall, causing a small cave-in to block the path to Honeydukes. The headmaster reappeared behind Hermione and pointed his wand at her.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Harry from the floor, causing Dumbledore's wand to move slightly. However, his grip tightened, so he didn't lose his wand. Harry took that distraction to get up while the professor re-aimed his wand at the brightest witch of her age.

Suddenly, there was a flash of fire, and a large, red phoenix appeared between Hermione and Dumbledore, facing the headmaster. Harry quickly made his way toward his girlfriend, who noticed that he had a small burn on his left cheek, while Albus grinned and said, "Fawkes! I knew you'd come back to me. Capture those two truant students so I can bring them back to school."

The phoenix turned around and flew toward the two teenagers, who were now holding hands. Getting between them, he put one claw on Harry's shoulder, and the other on Hermione's shoulder, and the three disappeared in a flash of fire.

Dumbledore shouted another expletive.

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## Chapter 15 – The Two Dark Lords

It was a normal, peaceful evening at the Granger residence. Translation: Adam and Marissa were snogging on the couch like a pair of teenagers. The fact that it was Friday the 13th didn't seem to bother the couple at all, as they enjoyed each other's company. They broke apart and stood up, however, when there was a bright flash of fire in front of them followed by a familiar cry of, "Mum, Dad!" Their daughter had arrived with her boyfriend and a large red bird, which Marissa believed was a phoenix based off of one of Hermione's books that she'd borrowed.

The young couple looked filthy and scared, and Harry's glasses were broken. He also had a burn on his left cheek. Hermione flung herself into her mother's arms and cried, while the phoenix flew to touch Harry's face with its own and shed a tear directly on his burn, instantly healing it while the parents watched in awe.

Finally, Adam spoke. "What happened? Why aren't you at Hogwarts?"

Hermione said, "We can't go back," between sobs.

Harry took a deep breath. "It's a long story, but I think that we'll all have to leave here."

"Is Voldemort coming after you?" asked Adam.

"No, although he's still after me. It's Dumbledore."

"What?" asked both parents together.

"It's true," said Hermione, finally letting go of her mother. "He just tried to kill me."

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After the Grangers had been apprised of what had been happening at Hogwarts for the past few weeks, and everything that Dumbledore had done against Harry, they agreed that the headmaster might check their house for the young couple, and so they were quickly

packing everything they needed – which consisted mainly of clothes and photos that couldn't be replaced – into Harry's bottomless trunk. Hermione hurriedly stuffed all the books from her small library in there as well.

Thirty minutes after the couple arrived at Granger residence, they were leaving. After healing Harry's burn, the phoenix landed on his shoulder and stayed there since. They tried to ask him to take them to Grimmauld Place, but he didn't seem to want to. Hermione theorized that phoenixes only transported people by flame when there was an urgent need. He, after all, didn't flame Harry, Ron, Ginny and Lockhart out of the Chamber of Secrets. They'd had to ride along on a normal flight.

However, it occurred to Harry that he had Dobby and Winky working for him, so he summoned them. First, they transported Mr. and Mrs. Granger to Grimmauld Place (after Harry told them the address so they could see it), then they transported Harry and Hermione there, and finally, they returned to move all of the Grangers' possessions, including the two Mercedes, to Black Manor.

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As soon as they arrived at Black Manor, Hermione took out her wand, pointed it at Harry's face, and said, "*Occulus repairo.*" His glasses were immediately repaired. At the same time, shrunk items from the Granger home began popping into the house at an alarming rate. Fortunately they weren't appearing where the people were standing. Obviously the elves were hard at work.

Ignoring the incoming objects, Harry looked panicky at Hermione while Adam and Marissa looked impressed with their daughter. "What did you do that for? The Ministry'll put you on trial for underage magic."

"Honestly," said Hermione, who was looking at him like he's grown an antler. "We are under the Fidelius Charm. No one can detect anything that happens in here, including underage magic."

Harry looked flabbergasted. "I wish someone had told me that the first time I came here. It would've been a lot easier than manually cleaning everything."

"They didn't tell anyone that. I found out later while reading a book on the *Fidelius Charm*. Besides, you'd just been charged with underage magic, and I'm sure no one wanted to encourage you to do it again."

"I'd been atta..."

"I know what happened, Harry," she said kindly. She then took a deep breath. "The point is that you know now."

At that moment, both Dobby and Winky appeared, looking concerned. Each of them was holding what appeared to be a toy Mercedes.

Dobby said, "Dobby and Winky is finishing shrinking the cars when we is sensing the headmaster coming. We is leaving immediately."

"Did he see you?" asked Hermione.

"No, Dobby isn't thinking so."

"Did you get all their stuff?" asked Harry.

"Yes. We is getting everything out of there before Professor Dumbledore is coming."

Harry smiled. "You both did a good job."

Dobby and Winky immediately began crying at the compliment. Before Harry could respond, Fawkes chirped, gaining his attention.

Harry gently asked, "What is it, Fawkes? I haven't properly thanked you yet for saving our lives."

"Yes, thank you, Fawkes," said Hermione.

Fawkes spread his wings and flew off of Harry's shoulder and turned around to face him. The phoenix stared into Harry's eyes for about thirty seconds. Neither blinked, and it was as though nothing else existed in the world for them. To Harry, it felt like the bird was looking

straight into his soul as a calming sensation began growing from deep inside him, as though a phoenix were singing – but Fawkes wasn't making a sound. Harry had a sudden impulse to hold out his right hand to the phoenix, which he did. Immediately, without breaking eye contact, Fawkes bit Harry's index finger, drawing blood. Although Harry winced a bit from the pain, he continued looking into Fawkes' eyes and did not withdraw his hand. Harry saw tears form in his new companion's eyes. Three of them dropped directly on his new wound, which healed immediately.

"Harry! Are you alright!" demanded Hermione urgently. "A magical...cocoon of silver light appeared around you and Fawkes and we could barely see you. I saw Fawkes bite you. I was afraid that he'd changed his mind and was taking you to Dumbledore or killing you himself. What happened?"

Harry looked around at the looks of concern on the three Grangers, and then to the looks of awe on the two elves. Before he could answer, Winky spoke. "Pardon me, Miss Grangey, but Fawkes isn't hurting Master Harry, but binding to him. We is being honored to be witnessing such an event, but Master Harry is being honored even greater."

She looked from Winky to her boyfriend. "Harry?"

"Winky's right. Fawkes did bind with me. I don't know how I know that, but I do. I agree that it's a great honor." He turned to his winged companion. "Thank you, Fawkes. I am deeply honored." The phoenix then began singing, filling everyone with hope and comfort. The song only lasted five minutes, but it seemed like it went on for much longer. When he stopped, everyone was refreshed.

"Wow," said Marissa.

"The books didn't do phoenix song justice," commented Hermione.

"It is incredible," Adam agreed.

"Yes it is," said Harry happily. Then he came to himself and added, "Now that we've calmed down, we need to figure out what to do."

"Well," said Hermione, "we're safe here."

"But what about work," said Adam. "We have a dental practice that..."

"That Dumbledore will no doubt visit," said Harry.

"Probably in disguise," added Hermione. "He could pose as any of your patients, or could walk in there invisible." She took a deep breath. "I've been worried about you with Voldemort out there as well, and have been considering asking you to leave the country, and the Granger name, already. I'd have probably asked you to do that by next year. With Dumbledore also after us, I think you should disappear now."

Harry looked grim as he faced his girlfriend's parents. "Hermione's right. You do have to disappear. You're safe in this house, and are welcome to stay here as long as you want. But if you feel cooped up in here, you'll have to leave the country." He then looked down at the ground, uncomfortable. "Er, if money's the problem, I've got plenty you can have."

"No, Harry, son, we don't need your money," said Adam, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder in a fatherly way. "Marissa and I will discuss what we want to do, but for now," he glanced at his wife, "I think we'll stay here at least until Hermione's birthday. However, I'll need to make a few phone calls to arrange things, and I'll need my phonebook."

Hermione pointed her wand toward the pile of shrunk junk and said, "Accio, dad's phonebook."

While his girlfriend was resizing her dad's phonebook, Harry said, "Dobby can take you to the house where Aunt Petunia's staying. That has a phone. Make all the calls you need to." He took a deep breath. "It would probably be best if I went there first so that Aunt Petunia doesn't panic when a strange man shows up."

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A minute later, Harry and Dobby popped into the middle of the living room of the house Petunia and Dudley Dursley were living. They'd

appeared right in front of the tele that Dudley was watching, and he jumped in fright, landing with his backside on the floor.

Harry laughed as he said, "Hi, Dudley. Is your mum here?" Just in case, he fingered his wand.

"Yes, she is, Potter," he yelled, "in the kitchen." Then he stormed off to his bedroom.

"Duddy-poo, is something wrong?" came Petunia's voice from the kitchen.

"He's in his room," said Harry.

"Oh, Hi, Dobby, Harry. Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"I...had to leave. Isn't Dudley supposed to be at Smeltings?"

"Since we were attacked at home, I thought he might be attacked at school, so I started home-schooling him. He doesn't seem to like it. So, what brings you here?"

"Hermione's parents have been targeted, too."

"Oh, no. Do they need to share this house?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "They're staying someplace else, but her dad needs to make some phone calls to set their affairs in order, and the place they're staying doesn't have a phone. So..."

"So you want him to make his calls from here?" Harry nodded.  
"You're the one paying the phone bill."

"Okay, Dobby, go get him." The elf disappeared with a pop, reappearing ten seconds later with Hermione's dad.

Harry introduced them. "Adam Granger, meet Petunia Dursley." They shook hands, and then Petunia showed him where the phone was.

While Dr. Granger made his phone calls, Harry updated his aunt on what was going on, mainly so that she wouldn't trust the headmaster if he somehow found her. "I NEVER liked that old man!" she declared,

"But I never thought he'd do that!" She then looked a bit nervous. "Are you sure that we're safe here?"

"Yeah. No one knows about this place. But if it makes you feel better, Hermione turns 17 next Thursday. I'm sure I can talk her into warding this house after that. I'm sure she knows some clever spells to protect you. I'll have her make you some emergency portkeys, too. I'm sure she knows how to do that. She's really brilliant."

"Yes, she is," said Adam, as he walked into the room with them. He was beaming with pride. "I'm glad to see that you admire her enough to brag to your aunt about her."

He smiled at the older man. "How could I not? I guess you're done with the phone?"

"Yes. We've sold our practice to a competitor who made an offer a few months ago. We can start up a new one if we want to when the crisis is over, or we could get along without working. We wouldn't be rich, but with the house paid for and our daughter raised, we won't need that much money to live comfortably on."

"Okay, then I guess I'll see you later, Aunt Petunia."

"Bye, Harry."

He then called Dobby back, who brought them to Grimmauld Place.

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The next morning, Minerva McGonagall was escorting three students to see Professor Dumbledore, who'd appeared very agitated when he'd asked her to retrieve them. Harry Potter and Hermione Granger had left the school the previous night, and no one seemed to know where they went. She, of course, knew that they had been considering it, so she wasn't worried, although she was a bit disappointed that they'd decided to leave. She'd tried explaining that to the headmaster earlier, but he didn't seem to be listening. He just told her to get Ron and Ginny Weasley, along with Neville Longbottom. Minerva knew that Harry was also friends with Luna Lovegood, but wasn't about to bring her up. Besides, Dumbledore

probably knew about her as well, but figured that Harry wouldn't have told the odd Ravenclaw anything he hadn't told his fellow Gryffindors, who looked distinctly nervous about this.

"Acid Pops," she said to the gargoyle, which moved out of the way, revealing the staircase.

They climbed it in silence, and when they reached the door to his office, Dumbledore's voice called out, "Come in," before the door opened.

The headmaster was looking much calmer, and the twinkle was back in his eyes as he sat at his desk motioning them to have a seat. "You may go, Minerva," he said.

"If you don't mind, headmaster, I believe I'd like to stay," she said firmly as she conjured an extra chair and sat down.

The twinkle disappeared from his eyes for a moment before returning. "Very well." Turning to the Gryffindors that had accompanied their head of house, he said, "Have a seat, children. Would any of you like a lemon drop?"

In Minerva's opinion, the kids looked terrified to take anything Dumbledore offered them as they politely shook their heads.

"Very well. How are your classes going?"

"Fine," they all answered.

He looked at the Weasley siblings. "Are you enjoying your Quidditch practices?"

"Y-yes, sir," said Ginny, nervously.

"Now, we'll get to the purpose of this meeting. As I'm sure you're aware, both Harry Potter and Hermione Granger left the castle last night." They nodded. "No doubt you are aware of the way Lord Voldemort has continually chased after Mr. Potter, and see the danger of them being outside the castle without protection."

"Pardon me," said Neville, "But it seems like this castle hasn't exactly been safe for them this year."

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore calmly, "The unfortunate incidents involving Miss Granger's prefect rounds. I thought they might have factored into this rash decision of theirs. However, I believe that that particular danger has been eliminated."

"By Harry," muttered Ginny.

With his eyes twinkling madly, Dumbledore looked into Ginny's eyes. "I see. You are all convinced that Mr. Potter can take care of himself. Against a few Death Eaters, I would agree. However, Lord Voldemort would send all of his followers after them, and no one could be expected to survive those odds. I must know where he is. Surely he told you, his closest friends."

"Ow!" exclaimed Ginny, just before breaking eye contact with the headmaster. Judging by the way the young girl was holding her head. Minerva had a suspicion about what her boss was doing. When Ron had the same reaction to Albus' gaze, her suspicion was confirmed.

"Albus!" she exclaimed, gaining his attention. She noticed that the twinkle was gone from his eyes. He turned his attention back to the students.

"So, none of you will answer your headmaster's questions?" he demanded, trying but failing to sound polite.

The children were completely still as Neville said, "We don't know where they went. They didn't tell us."

"Very well. Mr. and Miss Weasley, you are hereby removed from the Quidditch team; Mr. Longbottom, you are banned from the greenhouses except for when you have Herbology class; and all three of you are in detention."

"Professor Dumbledore!" interrupted Minerva. "They have done nothing wrong! If Mr. Potter and Miss Granger didn't choose to tell these students where they went, you cannot punish them for it!" The

old man glared at Minerva with more anger than she had ever seen before in his formerly kind face.

“Very well,” he spat. “You’re not being punished. You’re all dismissed.” Those kids didn’t need to be told twice as they bolted for the door, and Minerva didn’t blame them, as she, too, was in a hurry to escape this angry man.

“I won’t forget this insubordination, Minerva,” he said as she walked out the door.

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Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, was sitting at his desk looking miserable. He was not having a good day. When he arrived at the office, he received the horrible news that Death Eaters had massacred a muggle orphanage in London the night before, not leaving anyone alive. The building was then burned to the ground, with a Dark Mark hovering over it. He couldn’t for the life of him figure out why He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would want to destroy that particular orphanage. It had been around for over eighty years. The Daily Prophet was having a field day at his expense, as though it was his fault, and he could only imagine the howlers that his house elves were putting up with.

He was interrupted from his musing by his private floo coming to life with green flames. The face of Albus Dumbledore came out from it and looked up at him, eyes twinkling. “Minister, might I have a word with you?”

Rufus sighed and said, “I suppose.”

The professor smiled. “Splendid.” He then walked out of the fireplace, dusting himself off before taking a seat at the desk.

“What’s this about, Dumbledore? I don’t have a lot of time, with that orphanage attack last night...”

“Yes, that was unfortunate that Riddle destroyed his old orphanage,” Scrimgeour’s eyes widened. He knew from a previous meeting with

the headmaster that You-Know-Who's original name was Tom Riddle, but he'd forgotten that he'd grown up in an orphanage.

"Are you sure that was the orphanage..."

"Of course I'm sure. I went there myself to deliver his Hogwarts letter, which I now regret, of course. But we have more urgent business to attend to. Harry Potter and his girlfriend, Hermione Granger, are missing."

"WHAT?" he asked, shocked. He, naturally knew all about them. He'd made it a point to be familiar with everyone associated with Harry Potter. "Were they kidnapped? I know there have been attacks at Hogwarts but..."

"No. I'm afraid they left of their own free will. Alone. They need protection from Lord Voldemort. I need to find them. Will you have them found, arrested and brought to me for their own safety?"

The Minister looked at Dumbledore as though he'd grown an extra nose. "On what charge? It's legal for anyone who's passed their O.W.L.s to drop out of school. For all I know, they left to elope. We've got enough to worry about with Death Eater attacks to spend time looking for them. I hope Mr. Potter turns up, but I doubt he's in danger. From what I understand, he could probably out-duel most of my aurors. If you don't know where he is, then the odds are that You-Know-Who doesn't know, either."

-

The week went by quickly for Harry and the Grangers, and it was now Thursday, September 19th – Hermione's 17th birthday. They had spent the week making plans for what they'd do once Hermione could legally do magic, not to mention going through the material they would have covered at Hogwarts. Hermione had removed the tracking charm on Harry's motorcycle, and the two of them had gone through their other stuff and found and removed five more – two on Hermione's possessions. They'd also contacted Lupin, and he was now staying with them at Black Manor, helping Harry and Hermione train every day. He'd been shocked at how far Dumbledore had gone to manipulate Harry, but did believe them about it, considering that he

already knew that the old man had tried to swindle Harry out of his house.

Dobby had handled purchasing all magical supplies and so forth, since the odds of anyone recognizing an elf out running errands was minimal. However, Lupin had purchased anything they needed in the muggle world, including exercise equipment. Harry and Hermione had continued their regimen of daily training, and expanded it since they didn't have classes to attend. Remus was helping them with advanced dueling, along with teaching them apparition. Although they didn't think now was a good time to show up at the Ministry to test for a license, they realized that this would be a good skill to have.

Harry woke up very early to help arrange things for Hermione's surprise party. He knew that she planned on doing a lot of things that day, now that she could legally do magic, so he thought it would be best to surprise her with a party at breakfast. Her parents and Remus agreed.

He left his bedroom and walked over to the door of her room, casting a silencing spell so that their efforts wouldn't wake her, and then walked downstairs. He was joined shortly by his co-conspirators.

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At precisely 7:05 a.m., the door to Hermione's bedroom opened from the inside, revealing the birthday girl wearing her exercise clothes. Their custom had been to eat breakfast, practice dueling, and then exercise, followed by taking showers. She made her way down the stairs and opened the door to the kitchen.

“SURPRISE!!!”

The woman about jumped out of her skin. Her heart was beating rapidly as she caught her breath. She looked around the room to see a banner that said, ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY HERMIONE’ floating in the middle of the room. A cake was on the table, along with scrambled eggs. There was another table in the room that contained some gift-wrapped packages. She turned her attention to the smiling faces looking at her expectantly, waiting for a response. “Thanks,” she said, as a smile grew on her face.

"This was Harry's idea," said her mother. "He knew you might not have time for this later."

She looked at her boyfriend affectionately. "Thanks, Harry." She walked up and, mindful of her parents, gave him a chaste kiss.

The small party continued from that point, and Hermione enjoyed receiving several new books from her parents and Remus. Harry, however, gave her a gold necklace with a small white stag on it. She kissed him again when she opened that gift.

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At Hermione's insistence, they kept up with the training routine. After lunch, Hermione took four small bottles she'd saved for just this occasion. She had Harry sit down while she stood next to him, her wand pointed at his temple. "You know what to do?" He nodded.

They'd decided to send Harry's memory of watching Dumbledore's memory to both the Daily Prophet and the Minister of Magic, along with Hermione's memory of their last encounter with the headmaster. Hermione had learned that there were two different silent spells to extract memories. One would remove the memory from that person's mind, while the other would simply copy it. She was doing the latter spell as the silvery substance came from her boyfriend's mind.

They'd waited until her birthday so that no one could say that the memories were obtained illegally. Hedwig, who'd surprised them all by showing up the day after they'd left, had been offended when Harry performed a charm to turn her feathers brown so she wouldn't be recognized when she carried a brown paper bag, which contained the two memories and a note explaining the memories signed by Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, to the editor of the Daily Prophet. Once the owl was gone, an identical package was given to Fawkes, who flamed directly to the Minister's office.

"Now that that's out of the way," said Hermione, "We'll head over to Petunia's house."

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While Harry chatted with his aunt (and Dudley stayed in his room), Remus and Hermione performed several spells on Harry's house, occasionally needing him (the owner) to help in some way. Usually it was to provide a drop of blood on some rune they'd put there.

About twenty minutes after they arrived, Harry was talking to his aunt, when his newest companion flashed right in between them. Petunia jumped backwards while Harry said, "Hi, Fawkes." The phoenix chirped in response. Harry noticed that a rolled up piece of parchment had been tied to his leg. "Is that a letter from Scrimgeour?" Another chirp. "By the way, Fawkes, this is my Aunt Petunia."

"Er, nice to meet you, Fawkes," said the nervous woman while Harry got his mail. He unrolled the scroll and read it.

*Dear Mr. Potter and Miss Granger,*

*I must say that I was surprised, though pleased, to hear from you. I was even more surprised that your package was delivered by Professor Dumbledore's phoenix. That was, of course, before I read your letter of explanation.*

*I am naturally astounded by the accusations you've brought against the headmaster, although the fact that his phoenix has left him for you certainly adds credence to your story. I shall be viewing those memories shortly, and if they contain what you say they contain, I promise you that I will personally issue a warrant for his arrest, and I know that a phoenix won't help him escape this time.*

*Hoping that we can work together more in the future,*

*Rufus Scrimgeour*

*Minister of Magic*

Harry grinned and looked up at his phoenix and his aunt that was petting it. "Good news. Scrimgeour's gonna arrest Dumbledore. I've got to tell Hermione!" He got up and ran to his girlfriend, who was equally thrilled with the news. She gave him a very thorough kiss before resuming her work on the wards.

Dobby brought Mr. and Mrs. Granger there during the afternoon to use the phone, and returned them to Black Manor after they finished the calls and had a short visit with the others.

It was late at night when Harry, Hermione and Remus left. When it was over with, the house was impervious to fire and most spell damage, and was unplotable. It had wards against any magical being that Harry didn't specify from being inside it. No matter how they entered, they would immediately be stunned, and would not wake up until they were out of the house or keyed into the ward.

Hermione had found that ward in the Black Library. Of course, that book had recommended using the cruciatus curse, as opposed to the stunning spell. It could actually work with any spell that the owner wanted. Whatever spell is chosen, the affects remain until the victim is outside the house. They'd decided against using the Fidelius Charm, because it interferes with electricity. They also put an emergency portkey in the house so that there'd be a way to escape in case the wards failed.

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When they got back, Mr. and Mrs. Granger were waiting for them, and appeared nervous. "Hello, everyone," said Marissa. "How'd it go?"

"Great," said Hermione, beaming. "I was able to put what I've learned in Ancient Runes to practical use."

"We've rented a flat in Australia for six months," said Adam. "We'll be moving tomorrow morning."

Hermione looked crestfallen, but was trying to act happy. "Oh, er, that's great. Did you use those names I recommended?"

Marissa put her hand on her daughter's shoulder and smiled. "No. We didn't want to go by the names Wendell and Monica Wilkins." Harry and Remus snorted, earning a glare from Hermione. "We're going by the names Dan and Emma Radcliff."

"Er, that's great," said Harry. "I hope you enjoy it, and I hope that the trouble's over by then."

"Me, too," said Adam, who took a deep breath. "I know we can't talk you two into coming with us, but can you at least promise to be careful?"

Looking very serious, Hermione answered, "We'll do our best."

They hugged each other and went to bed, only to have a tearful goodbye the next morning, during which Adam charged Harry to, "Take care of my girl." Dobby apparated them both to the flat they'd rented and resized their stuff, including their cars, which he discretely put in their parking lot. Hermione had put a cunfundus charm on their license plates, so that anybody reading them would get confused. That way, no one would run their plates and find out their true identity. She'd also changed their driver's licenses to reflect their aliases.

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Neville and Ginny (who'd gotten together that week) were snogging that same night in a corner of the Gryffindor room when suddenly, the background noise disappeared. This was so unsettling that the young couple separated and looked around.

Everyone, including Ron (who was playing chess with Colin Creevey), was looking at the doorway, where Albus Dumbledore was standing, his eyes twinkling madly.

"Hello, everyone. I hope you're enjoying your year. I'd like to have a private chat with Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley, and Mr. Longbottom."

The three of them looked at each other, and then got up. "What would you like to know, Headmaster?" asked Ginny, politely. "We already told you that we don't know where Harry and Hermione are." At the same time, Ron whispered something to Colin before walking toward the headmaster.

With a twinkle in his eye, he answered, "I just thought that a private chat might allow some little detail they might have mentioned to rise to the surface of your thoughts."

"I doubt it," said Neville.

"I'm afraid I must insist, Mr. Longbottom. All three of you, come with me."

Realizing that they didn't have a choice, they walked out the door, ahead of Professor Dumbledore. Colin ran to the door, preventing it from completely closing, and watched them walk down the hallway, being careful not to be noticed by the headmaster. As soon as the quartet was out of sight, he ran out the door the other way.

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"I must insist that each of you drink this lemonade," Dumbledore said, still with the twinkle in his eyes, "It is exceptionally good." They were back in his office.

"No," said all three together, fairly certain of what was in the drink. The professor's countenance changed to rage.

"Very well. Have it your way." In less than one second, he'd grabbed his wand and placed each of the students in the full body-bind. They never even saw it coming. He pulled a small bottle with a clear liquid marked only with a V out of a desk drawer. He unscrewed the cap and dipped an eye-dropper in it, filling it to capacity. He recapped the liquid and replaced it in the drawer.

He walked over to Ron first, figuring that he was Harry's best friend for five years and would know the most. He released precisely three drops of the liquid into the redhead's mouth, and modified the body-bind to allow him to speak. Ron's eyes had a glazed look about them.

The headmaster's twinkle returned to his eyes as he smiled. "That's better. Now, what..."

At that moment, the door burst open, revealing an angry-looking Minerva McGonagall, who was standing next to a shocked-looking Professor Jones. McGonagall took one look at the students and pointed her wand at them, releasing them from the headmaster's spell. "What did he do?" she asked the teenagers while she pointed her wand at Dumbledore.

Ron said in a dreamy voice, “He put us in the full body-bind and put three drops of something I think is veritaserum in my mouth, and then released me enough to speak.”

“What,” asked Hestia, looking between Ron and the headmaster with horror in her eyes.

“Did he ask you any questions?” Minerva demanded, a look of shock on her face.

“No. He was about to when you came it,” he replied, still with a dreamy voice.

“Accio, Veritaserum!” she said, causing the eye dropper to come straight out of her boss’ hand. “Please put your wand on the table, headmaster.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do...”

“Stop! In the name of the Ministry of Magic you are under arrest, Professor Dumbledore!” shouted a voice from the doorway. They all looked to see Auror Hale, one of the people that had come to the school when Harry and Hermione were attacked by Snape and his Slytherins.

The headmaster seemed completely shocked. “On what charge?”

“Conspiracy to attempted murder and attempted murder of Miss Hermione Granger, for two,” said Scrimgeour, who had now come into view. “You are also charged with the use of the Imperius Curse on a Ministry employee, specifically Mr. Arthur Weasley, although that might be harder to prove.”

Dumbledore’s face was red. He seemed close to foaming at the mouth. “I didn’t...”

“You can add illegal use of veritaserum on a minor, specifically Mr. Ronald Weasley, to those charges, Minister,” said Minerva, handing him the dropper.

"Surrender your wand," said Auror Hale, with his wand pointed directly at Albus.

He pointed his wand directly at the young auror. "Never, and you'll never beat me! If you do not wish to get hurt, young man, I suggest...what!?"

While he'd been bragging to his opponent, he didn't notice Ginny Weasley sneak up and grab the wand out of his hand. He turned and glared at the smirking girl for a moment before being stupefied by the auror. As they were levitating the unconscious headmaster out of the room, the Minister of Magic walked up to Miss Weasley. "You may keep that wand, young lady. Mr. Ollivander once told me that a wand will surrender itself to anyone who takes it from its former master, so it's yours now."

"Thank you, Minister," she said politely. With silent agreement, they all followed Scrimgeour and Hale as they levitated Dumbledore down the stairs, through the entrance hall, and finally out the front doors, with several students watching in silence.

Once they were gone, the chattering began until McGonagall amplified her voice to say, "Attention, everyone. Professor Dumbledore is not ill. The fact is that he has been arrested on several charges, and resisted the Ministry, therefore getting stunned in the process. For the time being, as Deputy-Headmistress, I am in charge of the school and classes will go as normal. The Board of Directors will determine who Professor Dumbledore's replacement will be. Good evening."

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The next morning, the Daily Prophet had an article all about it that was extremely accurate for a change. It was titled, "*Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore Arrested after Attempting to Murder a Student – Harry Potter's Girlfriend.*" It detailed the memories that Harry and Hermione had sent them as well as the letter they'd sent, and what had just happened at Hogwarts. Needless to say, the wizarding community was shocked. So was Lord Voldemort when he read the paper that Wormtail had gotten him.

"Well, well, well," he said with a maniacal grin, "Dumbledore isn't so perfect, after all. I never knew he had it in him to attack a student, though."

"Y-yes, master," said Pettigrew.

"You do realize what this means, don't you?"

"Harry Potter will probably return to Hogwarts?"

"NO! Crucio!" While Wormtail writhed in agony, his silver hand banging on the floor, he conceded, "I suppose that he will, but that's not my point. Dumbledore is no longer protecting Hogwarts." He finally lifted the curse off of his minion.

"T-T-True, my lord," he agreed.

"Then we shall attack the castle and kill every last student there. That shall bring the wizarding world to its knees! I believe that Halloween will be the perfect time."

Peter's eyes widened. "A-Another massacre of children, master?" he asked. "I-I thought you'd enjoyed enough at that orphanage?"

"Crucio! I will never have killed enough to be satisfied!" He let up the curse. "Get out of my sight, rat! And find a way to sneak into Hogwarts. Kill the teachers in their beds the night before Halloween and summon me when it is done! The students will be leaderless and confused when we attack. Leave Harry Potter to me, though."

The little bald man with a silver hand made his way out of Voldemort's headquarters, wondering how much more of this he could take. He was still having nightmares of the young children that Voldemort had tortured before killing them. He wondered if it was too late – if there was any way to get out of this wretched life he'd chosen.

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"Silence!" demanded McGonagall, putting a sudden end to the arguments that were taking place. They were having the first Order meeting since the truth about Dumbledore had come out. "I know that

all of us have had our faith shaken by what Dumbledore turned out to be..."

"Says Potter," interrupted Shacklebolt. "How do we know..."

"I saw Dumbledore questioning students with veritaserum!" shouted Hestia Jones.

"He lied to both me and Harry about owning our old Headquarters, and then locked everyone out when he learned that Harry had found out!" said Lupin.

"But attempted murder of Hermione Granger?" questioned Mad-Eye.

"They provided memories," said Molly Weasley. "I still can't believe that he was the one who'd bewitched Arthur."

"Neither can I," said the Weasley patriarch, "but it does make sense. I do have memory lapses from that time that always end with me alone with Dumbledore. So, even though I can't actually remember his putting me under the curse, I do remember being with him."

"All this debate is pointless," said McGonagall. "He will have a trial wherein his victims will testify. The question is what to do with the Order now."

Taking a deep breath, Shacklebolt said, "Maybe we should just dissolve it. Snape's gone, and we don't know if he ever really was our spy, or if he was spying on us. We don't seem to have any extra resources or purpose now. The Ministry knows You-Know-Who is back, and is trying to combat him, so what is the point of continuing now?"

"I realize that recent event have been very trying, but I do not believe that the answer is to immediately give up," said Minerva. "I would like to end the meeting and plan for another one in two weeks. That should give us all time to think about how we can help in this war, and who our new leader should be."

"I can't believe that it's only been two weeks since we left," said Hermione. She and Harry had just stepped out of the fireplace in the Headmistress' office.

It was the morning of Sunday, September 29th. Dumbledore had had his trial a few days before, and had been found guilty and sentenced to life in Azkaban. Scrimgeour had demanded that the trial be held that soon so that the matter would be resolved quickly. The testimony of Harry, Hermione, Arthur, Ron, Ginny and Neville for his various crimes was enough to convict him. His only defense was that it was, "for the greater good." With him gone, the young couple (mainly Hermione) had decided to return to school. Hermione's parents, whom they visited the day before, were very supportive of that decision, but decided that they would stay in Australia until the war ended. They contacted the newly appointed Headmistress McGonagall, who informed them that she would be delighted to welcome them back.

"It hasn't been the same without you. Also, I should inform you, Miss Granger, that Miss. Parvati Patil told me last week that if you returned she would be more than happy to step down and allow you to resume your prefect responsibilities."

"That was nice of her," said Hermione. Harry managed to hold back a snort of laughter. He knew that Parvati would've hated being stuck as a prefect, and wasn't giving it up to be nice to Hermione.

"Where's your luggage?" asked the headmistress, looking around.

"Shrunk and in my pocket," said Harry with a grin.

"Very well," she said. "I'd suggest you make your way to Gryffindor Tower to announce your presence."

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"Here's your change, sir, and thank you for shopping at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," said George as he finished up the last customer of the evening. As soon as the door was closed behind the man, Fred pointed his wand at the entrance, causing it to glow green.

“What a day,” said George.

“I think we enjoyed inventing stuff so much,” said Fred.

“That we didn’t realize what hard work it is to actually run a store,” finished George.

“And a fine job you make of it,” said a squeaky voice behind them. Both Weasley twins spun around, pulled out their wands, and pointed them at the stranger in less than a second. Before them was a man they’d never actually seen before – at least as a human – but knew the general description of the balding man with graying hair and a rat-like face and pointed nose well enough. If there were any doubt about the identity of this intruder, it was eliminated by his silver right hand.

“Wormtail!” both twins said together.

The small man was shaking as he pleaded, “Please don’t kill me; I’m tired of the Dark Lord always killing children; I’m sorry for what I’ve done; I have information – important information to give to Harry Potter!” One of the twins magically bound him in ropes. He fell to the ground on his face.

“Why should we,” said George.

“Believe you,” said Fred. He threw a pellet at the intruder. A moment later, Pettigrew was covered in green slime, which was covered with feathers.

“I don’t want to serve the Dark Lord, anymore,” he cried.

“So, now you’re betraying him, too!”

“Seems all you’re good for!” They both used the Aguamenti spell to rinse him off while he stayed still, now kneeling on the floor.

“Please believe me!” he begged.

“We’ll see about that!” said Fred.

"Accio, veritaserum!" said George. A small bottle flew from behind the desk, straight into his hand.

Fred levitated and turned the broken man around and George put three drops of the clear liquid in his mouth. "Are you really betraying You-Know-Who?" he asked.

"Yes," he said with a dreamy voice.

"Why?"

"The Dark Lord is being so ruthless. He tortured those children at that orphanage and killed them all. He's planning on a massacre at Hogwarts on Halloween."

"He's attacking Hogwarts?" asked George.

"Yes."

"Why do you want to talk to Harry Potter?"

"Because I believe he's the Chosen One."

"What did you want to tell him?"

"That the Dark Lord has a powerful shield around himself through an enchanted object – he hasn't told me what. He can't be affected by any spell while he's wearing whatever it is. So anything Potter has planned to do to the Dark Lord will fail unless he finds a way around this shield."

"Very interesting," said Fred.

"Now tell us everything you know about the other Death Eaters."

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After finding out everything they could from Wormtail, including that Voldemort's headquarters were under the Fidelius Charm with Voldemort himself as Secret-Keeper, they stupefied him, took his wand, and put him in a cage that neither a man nor a rat could escape out of. They sent a note to Harry, telling him what Wormtail

had said about Hogwarts and Voldemort. Knowing that Voldemort was expecting a message from the rat, they knew they couldn't turn him over to the Ministry without blowing the opportunity to trap Voldemort on Halloween. Having previously learned from their parents that the Order was meeting the next day, they made it a point to show up there with their prisoner, and suggest that they prepare for Voldemort's trap that Wormtail had agreed to help orchestrate, if they promised to protect him.

-

Hermione reread the note that the twins had sent Harry for the fifth time while Harry paced angrily in the Room of Requirement. He'd gotten the letter and hour before and shown it to her. She decided they should talk about this before involving their close friends. She knew how he felt about Pettigrew and decided that it would be best for all concerned parties if she handled Harry's temper.

"They have Wormtail! Why can't I go there and tear that worthless piece of..."

"Harry! He's betrayed Voldemort and is help..."

"That's not the first one he's betrayed! We can't trust him for..."

"They used veritaserum!"

"Fine! He was telling the truth, today. That doesn't mean..."

"What it means, Harry, is that we have two problems to deal with: Hogwarts is being attacked and Voldemort can't be killed."

"It didn't say he couldn't be killed, just not by magic," said Harry. "If I can get close enough to strangle..."

"Of course!" exclaimed Hermione, excitedly. "Don't you remember our conversation about the power he doesn't know?"

"What?" Harry looked confused.

"Remember our discussion of what it could be? One of the possibilities was that muggle weaponry, which Voldemort has rejected along with everything else non-magical, could be the power he knows not." She bit her lip in concentration. She then smiled. "It's so simple. We need to get you a gun."

Harry looked at her like she'd grown a third ear. "How on earth can we get one of those?"

"Simple. We ask the Weasley twins to."

"Do you really think..."

"Apparating into and robbing a military base is a very easy thing for a wizard to do. Especially a sneaky one." She suddenly looked hesitant. "Maybe we should give them money to leave behind. I don't want to rob the government."

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Harry and Hermione had told Ron, Neville, Ginny and Luna about the impending attack, and together, they decided to inform the rest of the D.A. and begin planning a strategy. They brought their battle plan to McGonagall, who they knew had been informed of the attack by Fred and George, who had earned membership in the Order. Minerva had been placed in charge of the Order for the time being. Order members were being snuck into the school to stay until after the attack. McGonagall hated to admit it, but the D.A. had come up with a good plan. She did specify that only students who had passed their defense O.W.L.s would be allowed to participate, but both Ginny and Luna decided to sneak into the battle anyway. Luna told Ginny, "If we get in trouble, we can always claim that quembrats made us do it."

A few days after Wormtail defected, the twins had sent Harry a gun, holster, and a ton of ammo with Lupin when he snuck to the castle, along with a special item that Harry had asked him to bring. "They didn't say where they got it, and I don't want to know," Remus told the young couple. "They did say that they were coming the night before Halloween right after they close up shop. They claimed they'd be missed if they disappeared too soon, but I think they just want to make as much money as possible without missing the fight."

Harry began spending a lot of time practicing using the gun in the Room of Requirement, which provided targets. He decided that it would be best to dissolution the holster and gun, in hopes of surprising Riddle.

When the twins did arrive on October 30th, they brought Wormtail with them in his portable prison so that he could signal Voldemort to come. Harry thought about confronting Wormtail, but felt like he should wait until after the battle. He didn't trust himself to not strangle the rat, and they needed him around.

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That night, Harry asked Hermione if he could speak to her alone, so they found themselves in an abandoned classroom. She was sitting on a chair while her boyfriend was silently pacing.

"You're going to wear out the floor," she said with a grin.

He stopped pacing and stuck his hands in his pockets. He looked distinctly nervous as he swallowed. "I g-guess so."

"I guess you're nervous about tomorrow, huh?"

He shrugged. "I suppose, a little."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

He swallowed again, and Hermione could tell that he was beginning to sweat. "Er, I..." He fumbled around in his left pocket until a small black box fell out onto the floor. As he muttered an expletive, his girlfriend recognized what kind of box it was. Her eyes widened.

He grabbed the box and held it firmly in his hand, facing her. She gazed back at him lovingly. "Er, I'm not good at saying things, but I know that I couldn't live without you."

"Harry..."

"Let me finish. I couldn't have made it this far without you. You're the first person I want to see when I wake up, and the last one I want to

see when I go to sleep. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I-I love you, very much, and I want you to know that." He dropped down on one knee while Hermione fought back the tears that were threatening to fall. He opened the box, revealing a gold ring with a gem that looked like a diamond, except that it seemed to radiate with magic. Inside the stone, she could see every color of the rainbow pulsating. She was so mesmerized by the engagement ring that she barely heard him ask, "Will you marry me?"

She forced her attention back to the frightened face of the man kneeling in front of her and smiled brightly. "Of course I will." He placed the ring on her finger, and they kissed.

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On Halloween morning, everybody got into position, including the younger students, who were hidden in the Room of Requirement. With a trembling hand, Wormtail touched his Dark Mark, signaling to Voldemort that it was time to begin the attack. Fred then turned his wand on Wormtail. "It's not that we don't trust you...Okay, we don't trust you. You should be fine here until after the battle. Stupefy."

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Voldemort and his people apparated into position in Hogsmeade at 7:00 a.m. when they got the signal from Wormtail.

"Excellent," he hissed to his one hundred fifty Death Eaters. "The students will be waking up and making their way to the Great Hall. I can imagine the chaos that will ensue when they realize that none of their precious teachers are alive to help them."

They marched with Voldemort in the middle. A few Death Eaters in the back killed anybody from Hogsmeade that saw them. They marched straight toward Honeydukes, and killed the owners and the two auror guards that were watching the trap door into Hogwarts.

"This door will take us to the seventh floor of the castle. We will march from there directly to the Great Hall, killing any student we find. It is doubtful that any of them will be in their dormitories at this time. They'll be stuffing their faces and then panicking when they realize

that all the staff is gone. My loyal Slytherin students have already been killed by Potter, and I will personally kill him. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master," they all said.

"Yaxley, you take the lead. Open the trap door."

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It was exactly a half-hour later when the Death Eaters approached the Great Hall. They had run across no student so far, and Voldemort assured them that the kids were still sitting in the Great Hall waiting for their teachers to show up.

When they walked into the largest room in the castle, they saw that the professors were not in the Great Hall, but all the younger students were gone as well. The approximately seventy students present looked up and pointed their wands, which were already in their hands. They looked at each other in silence for about two seconds before Harry said, "Reducto!"

A powerful beam of magic shot out of Harry's wand, beheading Yaxley. The other students began firing as well, and the Death Eaters began shooting killing curses at the students, who were dodging as Voldemort's army marched in. The ones in the front were casting shields that could stop most of the students' spells.

Several Order members came out from hiding behind the staff table and joined in the fray. This was not at all the easy victory that Voldemort had planned. "Wormtail," he grumbled to himself.

From the antechamber where the Triwizard champions had congregated a few years before, brandishing the wand she had taken from Dumbledore, came Ginny Weasley. Following her was Luna Lovegood. They had snuck into that room when no one was looking so that they could participate in the battle.

Ginny fired the bat-bogey hex at the first Death Eater she saw. It went through the shield that had been conjured and hit the mask. The disgusting bogeys came out of the victim's nose, which was inside the mask. The skull-shaped mask was vibrating as the bats attacked

the face. He let down his guard to pull off his mask, and Ginny shot a *reducto* that took off the murderer's wand arm. Another one shot an *Avada Kedavra* at her, and she ducked.

Luna, along with most of the students, was firing stunning spells while Harry, Hermione, Neville and Ron were firing *Reducto*'s. The invading army seemed obsessed with firing killing curses, and about ten students had been hit. Suddenly, the Death Eaters in the back of the group began to fall as an army of teachers attacked from the rear.

Flitwick fired a, "*Reducto!*" that hit Voldemort in the back of the head, but did no damage. It did have the affect of angering Riddle. He turned and grinned at the small man, aiming his wand.

"You dare attack me? *Crucio!*"

Harry knew he had his chance while Flitwick was writhing on the floor. He pulled his disillusioned gun out of the holster and aimed it.

"You should have known better than to opposed me, you filthy half-breed," Tom said to Flitwick after releasing the curse. "*Avada...*" BOOM!!! Harry shot him in back of the head, effectively killing him.

"You killed our master!" shouted Alecto Carrow while aiming her wand at Harry. "*Crucio!*" The curse hit Harry, who fell to the floor writhing for a few seconds before Hermione shot a *Reducto* at her head, stopping her from ever hurting anybody else.

Ginny, in the meantime, was amazed at how well she was doing with her new wand. It seemed to be practically dueling for her, and no one could beat it. It went through shield spells like they were nothing, and seemed to be guiding her to move whenever a spell was shot at her. She didn't know what was happening, but she liked it. She most definitely preferred this wand to her old one.

The battle was fierce, and there were casualties, but within a half-hour all the Death Eaters were either killed or captured. The students that had been killed were Lavender Brown, Padma Patil, Cormac McLaggen, Terry Boot, and a dozen others that Harry didn't know. The casualties from the Order were Dedalus Diggle, Emmeline Vance and Sturgis Podmore. Sybil Trelawney was the only teacher killed,

although she had taken out three different Death Eaters by throwing crystal balls at them. Not many were injured, due to the fact that the Death Eaters mostly cast killing curses. You were either hit or you weren't. The few that were injured were mended quite quickly.

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## Epilogue

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Nearly Eighteen-year-old Harry Potter, who had taken his N.E.W.T.s a week before, moved the veil from covering Hermione's face and kissed her. They were in the muggle church that she had attended while growing up. Her parents were sitting in the front row on her side while Remus and Tonks, who consented to have brown hair for the occasion, were sitting in the front row of the groom's side of the sanctuary with a baby in between them. The baby's hair was completely covered by a hood. It was decided that all of Harry and Hermione's magical friends would sit on that side, while Hermione's muggle friends would sit on her side with what seemed like the whole Granger family.

Ron was best man, while his fiancé, Luna, was a bridesmaid. The Maid of Honor was Ginny, and her fiancé, Neville, was a groomsman. Molly Weasley was sitting with the rest of her family, crying. The twins said she was practicing for the two pending Weasley weddings, which were planned for the next summer (once the brides graduated) in one double wedding.

The preacher cleared his throat after about two minutes, when the couple didn't show any signs of ending their kiss. They separated their faces while blushing in response to the twins' catcalls, and walked out, holding hands, and went to the muggle reception (after being photographed a billion times). There, Harry was passed from one Granger relative to the other for about one hour of torture, which he knew would be worth it. The cover story for the short time they spent at the reception was that the couple had a plane to catch, but the truth was that a wizarding party was also planned. As soon as they could, they left for that reception.

At the magical reception, Ron stood up with a glass in his hands and cleared his throat. “Now, er, as I’m best man here, I’m supposed to make the first toast. I’ve known these two for a long time now – since we were all eleven years old. Harry and Hermione always seemed to have a special connection, even when they couldn’t see it. Anyway, they’ve been through a lot and they deserve the best, which is why Harry let me make this announcement. He’s just been signed on as Seeker for Puddlemere United,” people began clapping, and couldn’t hear, “and I’ve signed up to be Keeper for the Chudley Cannons!”

He started to sit down until his fiancé whispered, “Has a Wragroff made you forget that you’re making a toast?”

He stood back up with a red face. “Here’s to the bride and groom,” he said before taking a drink.

Ginny, who was also at the table, asked her brother, “Why didn’t you announce that Hermione’s opening the Lily Potter Library?”

“Why would they want to hear that?” he whispered back.

“Because it’s the first public library to ever contain both wizarding and muggle books, and it’s an effort to promote understanding muggles better, and it’s devoted to Harry’s mother. Dad’ll love it.”

“What’s that got to do with Quidditch?” Ron asked.

Sighing, his sister said, “I’m sure there’ll be a Quidditch book there.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll announce it.”

“Never mind.”

In the mean time, Harry and Hermione were pretty much oblivious to everything going on around them, except for their requests to kiss, yet again. Finally, when it was getting late, Harry got up to make his own speech. “Thank you, everyone, for coming and celebrating this happy day with us. As with all good things, it has to come to an end.”

The catcalls coming from half the people there made it clear why they thought Harry was in a hurry to leave the party.

"This has been fun, and I look forward to the next party. Until then, goodbye."

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The End.

Although I didn't put it in the story, Pettigrew was pardoned after clearing Sirius' name, but never became a close enough friend to Harry (or Remus for that matter) to be at his wedding.

Please review. Thank you to those who have. To paraphrase Harry, thank you, everyone, for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. As with all good things, it has to come to an end. This has been fun, and I look forward to my next story. Until then, goodbye.

By the way, I've started rereading HBP, and noticed that in the 2nd chapter (Spinner's End), it looks like Bellatrix almost told Snape and Narcissa about the Horcrux. What do you think?

*"He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful –"*

*"Does he?" said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. "Does he still, after the fiasco at the Ministry?"*

*"That was not my fault!" said Bellatrix, flushing. "The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious – if Lucius hadn't –"*

I believe that the 'most precious' thing she was referring to was Hufflepuff's Cup, which indicates that he'd given it to her before he'd been vanquished, which suggests that it was in her vault the whole time she was in Azkaban.